

# Concentrated Vision: Celebrity Images from the 1930s and 1940s

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## Concentrated Vision

Gazing at the racks of DVD films on sale in high street music stores, my eye is drawn towards the black and white covers showing elegant and simple images wrapped around collections of films starring Rita Hayworth, Lana Turner, Bette Davis and other Hollywood greats. Partly, it is the images that catch my attention; they seem calm and refined in a mass of colour and frenzy. But it is also the lure of romance, nostalgia and elegance that they evoke. This glamour and nostalgia is frequently referenced in modern society – at red carpet events and period dramas and films, on handbags depicting Audrey as Holly Golightly, in makeovers and TV shows such as the recent *Ladette to Lady* on British TV. There is something about the stars of yesteryear which draws us, and for the most part it is not that we are aware of the roles they played in the movies, or their artistic endeavours: it is their *image* with which we are familiar. This is a fascinating idea; how has a public who has little idea of the lives of the stars built and / or maintained an admiration, or at least a clear recognition of their faces?

The importance of the still photograph in creating this sealed image is central. The photograph performs one of the most crucial roles in the production of stardom in making an actor or actress (and I unashamedly concentrate my own vision on the actress for the purposes of this analysis) both visible and memorable to their public. The photographer, through the magic and power of the photographic image, becomes the star-maker. This paper will attempt to examine the ways in which the photograph, or in some cases particular photographers and their muses, has / have fulfilled this function.

To provide an historical context leading up to the celebrity images of the 1930s and 1940s, it is necessary to start by examining the conjoining of photography and the public fascination with the celebrity image through the Victorian phenomenon of the *carte de visite*. The fascination for images of popular famous faces was a marriage made in heaven for the burgeoning film industry. The development of stills photography associated with this bears testament to the desire of the public, the actors and the film studio for images which created connections, forged relationships and generated income. This period of development in still photography lasted well into the beginning of the twentieth century, and it is here that it becomes necessary to move focus on to the start of the phenomenon of the Hollywood film industry. From small beginnings, the importance of still photography rose within the studio system to hold great importance and sway, both with film production and audience attraction.

This leads into what can be termed the height of real worship and adulation at the temple of the stars; the 1930s and 1940s. This is a pivotal point in the connections and relationships between the public and their celebrities – the ‘passage from awe to charm’ in Roland Barthes terms. The 1930s were a period of economic depression leading into great political upheaval and on to World War II. The 1940s were also times of hardship, loss and uncertainty. Throughout, the role of the film star offered many things to a disparate and suffering public. That the public were interested in the lives and stories of their favourite celebrities is borne out by the plethora of movie

magazines and 'lifestyle' magazines which carried their stories and messages to the fans. But more than that, they carried images, spreading the visibility of the stars and familiarity with them.

This is the argument that the celebrity generates para-social interactions that operate as a means of compensating for changes in the social construction of the communities within which many of us live. (Turner 2004: 23)

It is the possible ways in which photography contributes to the development of these parasocial relationships that will be examined in light of the images discussed within this paper.

In order to appreciate the skill, talent and creative genius of the work of some of the photographers of this period, this paper will concentrate on three photographers. It was a difficult choice – there are a number of significant photographers working within this period, and many great images. I selected three photographers who are most strongly associated with particular celebrities and whose work epitomises some of the ideas of glamour and worship central to the production of stardom. Firstly, the work of Clarence Sinclair Bull, whose images of Greta Garbo are the ones which I see in my mind's eye when I am asked to think of classic Hollywood portraiture. Secondly George Hurrell, the photographer who changed the way his starring ladies, and in particular Norma Shearer, were seen. Finally, although not a Hollywood photographer, Angus McBean's images made careers and changed the way certain stars were seen – in particular Vivien Leigh, and it is for that reason, along with the fact that his images are exquisite, that he has been included here.

The star portraits discussed here concentrated the vision of a generation. In looking so closely at the role photography played within this, we might be able to see if and where any traces of that legacy have been left behind.

### **'Our Celebrities': Victorian Technologies of Stardom**

From the delicate perfection of the Daguerrotype to the instant mobile phone image-message of today, photography and portraiture are inextricably linked. The viewer of the image is fascinated by the human face, and in particular by faces they recognise. At its beginnings, photography was feted for its ability to faithfully depict the truth of what the camera saw before it, and its use for portraiture was heavily exploited from the outset. In the 1840s, portrait studios sprung up producing Daguerrotypes and calotypes under licence. These processes however, were *almost* as exclusive as the painted portrait. The images were one-offs which could not be replicated and were heavily restricted by the patents of Daguerre and Fox Talbot, leading to cost implications. However, a couple of significant developments in photographic processes in the 1850s began to facilitate photography's relationship with representing the person in general and celebrity representation in particular. First, there was the release of information about the patent free collodion process of Scott Archer in 1851. This process was easier to reproduce than the calotype and needed shorter exposure times, allowing the process of sitting for portraits to become more relaxed and less demanding. Secondly, and more significantly for the production and distribution potential, in 1854 Andre Disderi patented the process of production of the *Carte de Visite*. This was a system of using multiple lenses to produce eight to ten small identical images on a single negative plate. The images were small, and could be mounted on to card and given to friends and acquaintances. For portrait photographers, this meant that multiple images could be produced and sold, and perhaps more importantly, circulated to a wider public than just the sitter. Although named 'calling cards', it is said that they were rarely used for this purpose, but more often for collecting images and at the outset for their novelty value. For certain social classes, this meant that they would be able to collect the *cartes* of people they had come into contact with. But for a widening market, it became possible to collect the likenesses of notable people, people they had heard of, or increasingly, those they had never met but might like to, or were just intrigued to see their likeness.

The public were becoming gripped with biographies of the eminent and important men (and, royalty aside, it *was* mostly men.). The photographs of these living 'men of mark' added extra interest. As Roger Hargreaves points out, "for fame to flourish, the image needs to be placed in the public domain either through display or proliferation." (Hamilton and Hargreaves 2001: 21)

Photography was now in a position to be able to do fulfil both these functions – a means of display *and* proliferation. As Rojek points out:

'Photography, then, furnished celebrity culture with powerful new ways of staging and extending celebrity. It introduced a new and expanding medium of representation that swiftly displaced printed text as the primary means of communicating celebrity. Photographs made fame instant and ubiquitous in ways the printed word could not match. (Rojek 2001: 128)

As the images were easy and cheap to obtain, the public demanded more and more images. To produce more images, the photographers required more sitters, and the subjects of the images expanded from predominantly royalty, clergy, the military and the higher social classes, to industrialists, inventors, and the more popular writers, poets, actors and actresses and music hall stars. Hargreaves argues that the importance of the *carte de visite* was its status as an 'intermediary to mass circulation' allowing celebrity pictures to be "produced on a mass scale, then circulated, sold, collected and assembled." (Hamilton and Hargreaves 2001: 43) To give an idea of the scale of the popularity of the cartes, in 1862 50,000 cartes per month passed through one particular wholesale house, and between 1860 and 1862 between 3 and 4 million cartes of Queen Victoria were sold.<sup>1</sup>

Celebrities had much to gain from having their image in the public eye. Not just commercially, from selling more copies of books or tickets for performances, but also in popularity, recognition and reputation. Although the cartes fell out of popularity around the 1880s, they had paved the way and created the desire for the public to see the celebrated people of the day. More outlets for dissemination of these images became available around the turn of the century and the moving image had begun to become increasingly popular. This had laid the foundations for the 'chains of attraction' which the photograph was able to establish between the celebrity subject and the viewing and collecting public.

## Visual Repositioning

At the start of the moving image era, films concentrated on their ability to depict "action and movement" (Marshall 1997: 79), in a similar way to that in which photography at its outset had relied on its ability to provide a 'faithful likeness' of subject. However, with rising popularity and technological advances in the creation of more films for public consumption, films soon began to depict characters and storylines, and the fantasy world of the movies exploded a number of new celebrities into the public consciousness. The still image and the movies were responsible for interesting shifts in perspectives for the viewer. On the one hand, photography had physically repositioned the celebrity, or rather the image of the celebrity, into the homes of the public. In doing this, it had in a way brought the celebrities closer to their public. It had also allowed the viewer to study the face, frozen in the still photograph, and build an attachment to the subject through familiarity and recognition. Cinema on the other hand, was responsible for a very different visual repositioning of the star. The moving image, projected huge on to the big screen brought into play different new perspectives for the viewer. The faces of the screen star were there to be viewed in great detail, larger than life, and seen more up close and intimately than the viewer would have seen anyone other than close family. At the same time, this size could produce a feeling of awe, from the small cinema-goer in their seat to the big screen presence of the star. Both visual media have a strong pull on their audiences, and it is where these forces meet, in the studied, considered photographic portrait of the film star that the concentrated vision of the public is most strongly affected.

The links between still photographs and the moving image were nowhere more prominent than in Hollywood, around the growing film industry. High street photographers were responsible in the main for taking publicity images of the film actors and actresses, at the actors request. Even very early film stars such as Mary Pickford (often cited as the first true film star) recognised the importance of having good images taken to assure their place in the public eye. It is said that during the 1920s, she spent as much as \$50,000 per year on having photographs taken, recognising the importance of disseminating one's image among the public.<sup>2</sup> Fahey and Rich point out that these images were very much a two way process between sitter and photographer, as the images were taken at the request of the stars themselves, not controlled by the studios as would prove to be the case later on. These images began to find outlets in the fan magazines, and other publications such as *Vanity Fair* which, in a similar way to the celebrity *cartes de visite*, provided an outlet for both display, promotion and circulation of the celebrity image. However, by the 1920s, the Hollywood studios began to develop their own portrait 'galleries'. This meant photographers being employed by the studios and given the task of promoting and enhancing the profile and adulation of the studio's assets – the stars themselves. This led to a new aesthetic in the Hollywood portrait; one that was designed to offer up the stars as icons for public veneration:

As portraitists, studio photographers did not aim to express the subjects characters but rather to create icons that the public could worship. (Fahey and Rich 1988: 15)

Phrases such as the 'matinee idol' came into common usage. Studios wanted fans to stay loyal to their stars and keep going to see the films and buy the magazines. It can even be said that the names of some of the stars were become more reverential: from the "Little Mary" nickname of Mary Pickford to the "Divine" Greta Garbo.

## The Face of Garbo

The Divine Garbo, also known as “The Face” and “the Swedish Sphinx” epitomised the enigma of the early Hollywood star. What we would now call ‘classic’ images of her reflect this – or more appropriately they created this impression. The star reputedly wanted ‘to be alone’, gave no interviews, no autographs, attended no premieres and answered no fan mail; indeed the only real connection we have is through the visual. Images by Steichen (1928) and Ruth Harriet Louise (late 1920s) and of course Clarence Sinclair Bull create, or reinforce the enigma.

She was a star who crossed over from the silent films to the talkies; perhaps this also formed part of the mystique. The photographic image that resonates is mysterious. As Roland Barthes described her face:

Garbo still belongs to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human face as one would in a philtre, when a face represented a kind of absolute state of the flesh, which could neither be reached nor renounced. (Barthes 1993: 56)

Compare this with Clarence Sinclair Bull’s comments:

Others had tried before me to solve the mystery of that beguiling face... I accepted it for what it was – nature’s work of art... She was the face, and I was the camera. We each tried to get the best out of our equipment. (Fahey and Rich 1988: 101)

Garbo was acutely aware of her photographic image. From 1925 to 1929, she had chosen Ruth Harriet Louise, one of the most talented photographers at MGM, as her exclusive portrait photographer. (Fahey and Rich 1988: 15). After this however, she turned to the photographer Clarence Sinclair Bull, who from 1924 had been head of stills photography at MGM. Bull became her favourite photographer, and from the early 1930s her exclusive photographer. Estimates vary but it is said that between 1929 and 1941, Bull took between 2000 and 4000 images of Garbo.

Many images of Garbo concentrate of the close-up. Close-ups, particularly those where the relationship played out in the camera lens between photographer and subject seems to be at its most powerful, connect the viewer to both the photograph and the subject. They help to build “an illusion of intimacy” (Schickel 1985) and an attempt to understand the subject. The psychological distance still remains (in Barthes terms, the face of Garbo marks this transition between the ages of awe and charm)(Barthes 1993: 57), but the possibility of ownership of the photograph as an object reinforces the connection with the star.



Greta Garbo:

MGM / The Kobal Collection / Clarence Sinclair Bull<sup>3</sup>

The still image holds the key to this intimacy. It provided (and still does) the viewer / owner of the image with a tangible connection to the unattainable, both as an object, and as a symbol of “something directly stencilled off the real” (Sontag 1978: 154). This connection to the referent of the photograph connects the viewer in a way which is one step removed from the real, but it is also paradoxically one step closer to it too.

### Sex Appeal with Discretion – Norma Shearer

The role of the Hollywood gallery photographer was a complex one. First and foremost, they were photographers applying their skills to produce great images. In doing so, Fahey and Rich argue that they influenced the aesthetic of the movies themselves, in particular with their expertise on understanding camera craft, and in particular the importance of lighting. Secondly, they wielded power in their role as star makers - they were an essential part of the process of the production of stardom. Great photographs made stars of their subjects. Relatively unknown ‘starlets’ could build a following through the dissemination of their image. Photographs could also play an important role in obtaining acting roles for their subjects (for example this was said to be the case for both Norma Shearer and Vivien Leigh, as we will see). Finally, the photographers were studio employees; employed to make the assets of the studio (i.e. the stars themselves) establish and maintain their commercial value. Without the visual photographic input into the magazines and posters, stars would fade from view – after all, there is a much quicker turnaround for still images than feature films.

The next photographer I would like to discuss executed all of these functions. George Hurrell had studied art and had very briefly worked as an assistant to Edward Steichen in the late 1920s. Steichen, described as the “greatest living portrait photographer” in the 1930s (cited in Raeburn 2006: 63) was an artist who “unlike many artists... admired business and asserted that the finest art was always commercial” (Raeburn 2006: 64). Hurrell clearly took this to heart. After seeing one of his images, Norma Shearer commissioned him to make photographs of her. Shearer was known as the “First lady of MGM”, being married to Louis B Meyer. Hurrell’s images of her were said to have gained her the lead role in her *The Divorcee* (1930), for which she won an Oscar for Best Actress. It had not been thought that she had enough sex appeal for the

role, but Hurrell’s images changed that. Hurrell was given the role of Head of MGM portrait gallery in 1930.



Norma Shearer:

MGM / The Kobal Collection / George Hurrell<sup>4</sup>



Hurrell had the ability to manifest a star's sex appeal, communicating that magic and visual electricity, that 'star quality'. This unique ability prompted Esquire magazine to comment in 1936, "A Hurrell portrait is to the ordinary publicity still about what a Rolls Royce is to a roller skate." (Fahey and Rich: 19)

So Hurrell was a star maker and a great artist. He also had the ability through his own photographic aesthetic to shape the way in which the star was viewed. His lighting techniques were elaborate and complex, and every trick in the book was used to hide blemishes, change shapes and enhance features. He was able to use photography to generate the ideal. This was not easily achieved – there was no such thing as a snapshot taken. In particular, it was his lighting techniques for which he was most known; indeed it is said that Hollywood film makers employed the same overhead boom lighting techniques when they saw how effective it could be on screen. Hurrell used a variety of techniques, and maybe as controversially as when alteration techniques are used today:

Hurrell's exhaustive retouching of negatives to eliminate unwanted facial and body blemishes and to enhance the subject's finest qualities continues to be a source of controversy among movie and art critics. Each negative was painstakingly scrubbed and worked over with graphite powder smoothing away blemishes and unwanted lines. What resulted was a stunning photographic transformation – a fantasy of beauty and perfection. ([www.lafterhall.com/hurrell.html](http://www.lafterhall.com/hurrell.html))

The social context of the 1930s would reinforce a possible need for some form of escapism. The task of the Hollywood photographer was in no way to show truth and reality, but to create artifice, glamour, beauty and desire.

### **'A Love Affair in Camera' – Vivien Leigh**

The task of artifice was, and of course still is, taken up to different extents by photographers outside the glamorous world of Hollywood. Portrait photographers are usually some of the most adept at this image creation. At this point, I want to look at images by Angus McBean of Vivien Leigh. It is a little problematic to include McBean as a case study here, as he was not a Hollywood photographer, but an independent London based studio photographer. It is also problematic to include Vivien, a great actress who was not confined to Hollywood but also worked both for stage and screen in the USA and the UK. The reasons I have included them are threefold.

First, for the idea of the creation of glamour and beauty in stills photography of the time and the influence this had outside of the Hollywood enclave. Secondly, for the way in which a final portrait appears to draw substance or impact from the three way relationship between photographer, their camera and the sitter can have on the final image. And finally, as a star maker; it is said to be McBean's images of Vivien which gained her access to Hollywood from her starting her career on the British stage. The images of Leigh taken in McBean's studio drew the director's attention to her and lead to her casting for her heart's desire – the role of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*.

McBean's first photographs of Leigh were his first as a professional photographer. When he was asked to photograph her, Ivor Novello said to McBean that he had "found a girl with a dream of a face" (McBean 1989). As in the case of Garbo earlier, we see the importance of what we would term the photogenic face. Photography allows visibility and access to a star. In principle, not everyone has access to the star; only a very small number of people can see them in the flesh, a larger number through performance, but the largest number of all is through contact with the visual still image. This image has to be successful; both in terms of what the viewer is looking for and what the sitter wants to be seen. With images of the stars, small blemishes and imperfections can be removed, but the most successful star always seems to be the one who photographs well. Combine a great photographer and a photogenic face, and allow the studio public relations machine to roll into motion, and this appears to be a way many Hollywood stars were created. This is not intended to decry the talents of the actresses themselves, but just to reinforce the power of the visual for generating interest.

McBean subtitled his book of images of Vivien "A Love Affair in Camera", and admitted that "she was the most beautiful woman I ever photographed... Of course, I am biased – I was more than a little in love with her" (McBean 1989: 9) Working from an aesthetic developed from the Hollywood style, but having the freedom of working as the independent photographer commissioned by the actress herself, McBean pointed out

I never used the techniques of the Hollywood film studio photographers, who completely retouched all character from faces in the pursuit of apparent perfection, but we had become accustomed in the 1930s to the seemingly endless flow of marmorial beauties from the film work and took note of their style. (McBean 1989: 14)

It is interesting to note this development. The flow of beauty is still maintained, but with room for celebrating character in the face and the slight imperfections. This continued into the 1950s of course, with stars such as Audrey Hepburn. Hepburn is another example of a McBean 'discovery', and even appeared in a movie celebrating the idea of the beauty in difference entitled *Funny Face* (1957).

McBean's natural photographic / artistic 'style' was often surreal, when commissions permitted. He was renowned for his surreal portraits in *The Sketch*, including one of Vivien as Aurora, Goddess of Dawn. His work also featured heavily in *Picture Post*, indeed in 1940, they made a feature of his shoot with Diana Churchill.<sup>5</sup> But always, his photographs revealed a reverence and admiration for the subject and the ability in homage to the Hollywood ideal to create glamour and beauty in the still image:

Mr McBean longed to take photographs as fervently as I desired to be photographed. When I asked him what portrait photography was all about he said "It's simple. They want to be beautiful"<sup>6</sup>

I would take it further than this; it is not just that the subjects want to be beautiful, but that the viewing public at that time wanted to see beauty. In the context of the time, the 1930s and 1940s were times of hardship, fear and uncertainty. The "Golden Age of the Movies" was said to be between 1925 and 1940. This Golden Age was not just in terms of numbers of movies made and number of movie goers, but also in the awe of the big screen, the Hollywood spectacular, and the impossible glamour and perfection and escapism from realities which the world visible to the masses in the movies and the photographs afforded. The metaphor of the Spectacle, read in conjunction with the Hollywood spectacular draws interesting comparisons:

...the manufactured world of representations and images has utterly detached itself from 'reality', bears no relation to lived experience and constitutes itself as a pseudo world apart, but one on which our vision is fully concentrated. (Slater in Evans 1997: 106)

The studios could guide us in ways to concentrate our vision - pin up pictures of glamorous stars were sent to GIs; the image of Betty Grable taken by Powolny an almost iconic example of this.

Vision could not continue in this intensely concentrated way. Increasing numbers of stars, movies and pictures all contributed to the idea of the image becoming more commonplace, and thus less valuable in some way. On a wider scale though, world events and technological changes had taken over right thorough out the period under discussion here. The need to have icons with whom the public could identify and admire rather than simply worship had come about. Stars were used to support the war effort, stars were shown to empathise with what the public were experiencing, stars could promote imitative consumption of goods, and intensely powerful messages could be communicated through the connections the public had with their screen 'heroines'. It is interesting to point out that Fahey and Rich (1988) link the ending of this period of absolute glamour with changes in the distribution channels Hollywood studios. They point out the significance of the 1948 change in legislation where the studios were no longer owners of the movie theatres. This meant a change in funding - box office receipts no longer paid for more films to be made. In paring down expenses, many studios released their photographers who once again became freelance, and a new cycle of image making was started.

## Legacies of Glamour

So, there were social, political and commercial reasons for new ways of representing the Hollywood star, and in a way making that vision wider, less concentrated on the idea of impossible, unattainable perfection. Following on from the widening of celebrity visibility through the art of the photographer, we moved into the artifice of the creation of more than a celebrity, but the 'picture personality' and 'the star' (deCordova in Gledhill 1998). In trying to concentrate our vision on icons of the screen, the photograph became a connection to the represented star; they became closer to their audience, whilst maintaining their distance and allure. Images such as those we have seen all used the power of the still image to generate attraction, interest and desire for the human story. From all of this, we can see that there are clear legacies of the iconic Hollywood portraits.

Firstly, it can certainly be said that we still operate in a world where celebrity images proliferate. This has continued into the idea of the image becoming the story, and we see this in the plethora of celebrity magazines using incredibly high turnover of images of celebrities. There is perhaps a more stratified hierarchy of celebrity shown, with the highest accolade being the 'superstar'; quite often interestingly those who are aware of how to control their own image and its usage similar to the way in which the Hollywood studios operated in the 1930s and 1940s. Another clear legacy is the way in which artifice remains an essential tool of the photographer's trade

when it comes to controlling media image. Today we use airbrushing and photoshop to create the effects which mask, enhance, lengthen and change features in the celebrity portrait. In the 1930s and 1940s, Hurrell, Bull and others were achieving the same things using the tools available to them – light, shadow and darkroom techniques. Maybe what is different is that today when this happens, it makes the news – we want to be informed about how the tricks are done.

The idea of the glamour of the Hollywood and celebrity lifestyle remains also. This brings together ideas of elegance, simplicity, poise, grace and a nostalgia for the perfect vision of the 30s / 40s star. Today, this is mentioned every time an actress, model or TV presenter appears on the red carpet wearing a stunning dress in homage to 1940s fashion and deep matt red lipstick. And finally arising from this comes the notions of what fame looks like and brings with it. A connection to celebrities that goes beyond what we see on the page. In the passage from awe to charm, the notion of celebrity itself, rather than the personality can become more accessible and aspirational. Everyone can be famous for fifteen minutes. That fame can be accessible is perhaps the most potent legacy of the concentrated vision of the celebrity images of the 1930s and 1940s:

“Brady regards the modern desire for fame as a perfectly reasonable impulse and explains some of its attractions. First, he points out that fame does more than offer us visibility, it offers a particularly flattering kind of visibility in which ‘all blemishes are smoothed and all wounds healed’. Fame is the achievement of a magical moment of perfection, the end point of a process that restores ‘integrity and wholeness’ to a representation of the self.” (Turner 2004: 60)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Figures taken from two sources: Macaulay and Plunkett. See bibliography.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Fahey and Rich’s book for much of the historical detail of Hollywood photographers during this period.

<sup>3</sup> Image used with kind permission of The Kobal Collection. No copying permitted.

<sup>4</sup> Image used with kind permission of The Kobal Collection. No copying permitted.

<sup>5</sup> Picture Post 17 February 1940 “How to Photograph a Beauty”

<sup>6</sup> Caption beneath McBean image of Quentin Crisp in National Portrait Gallery, London’s exhibition: Portraits: Angus McBean, October 2006.

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**Please mention the bibliographic information when referring to this book:**

*History of Stardom Reconsidered*. Edited by Kari Kallioniemi, Kimi Kärki, Janne Mäkelä and Hannu Salmi. Turku: International Institute for Popular Culture, 2007. (Available as an eBook at <http://iipc.utu.fi/reconsidered/>)