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Lisa Downing & Sue Harris, eds. *From Perversion to Purity: The Stardom of Catherine Deneuve*. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2007. 188 pp. Illustrations, notes, works cited, index. \$57.56 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978 0 7190 7338 0.

Review by Sylvie Blum-Reid, University of Florida.

This nice collection of essays on Catherine Deneuve's cinematic and extra-cinematic image is comprised of ten chapters stemming mostly from British film scholarship. It covers Deneuve's career from its beginning in 1961, with her fairy tale-like discovery by Jacques Demy, which is compared to the awakening of 'the sleeping beauty' in such classics as *Les parapluies de Cherbourg*, *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort*, and *Peau d'âne*. It then moves on to Polanski and Buñuel, two masters of cinema who greatly explored one aspect of Deneuve's persona considered to represent two poles--that of the pure, untouched, icy cold, blonde beauty, and that of a more dangerous, sexually perverse character. Both apparently conflicting poles will be largely covered in the study. Thus, the scope of the essays is not limited to her film career with a single auteur; it incorporates an analysis of her persona, as it emerges from the sum of her films, since a star is not just a static object but composed of "many complex layers which are constantly shifting and are often contradictory" (p. 77). [1]

*From Perversion to Purity* is in large part indebted to the field of star studies that has been predominantly based in the Anglo-Saxon world. It really began in the 1970s with Richard Dyer's study, *Stars* (1979), although Edgar Morin and his opus on *Les Stars* came out in 1957. French film scholars have only recently tackled star studies within the French domain. These essays borrow heavily from Dyer's approach, listing current French star studies criticism by such critics and historians as Ginette Vincendeau and Susan Hayward, whenever available. The amount of research and scholarship is definitely impressive. The book is solidly grounded. It also moves away from both a purely national cinema perspective which, according to the editors' introductory statement is reductive (p. 8), and from genre criticism, even though Deneuve has taken part in many genres ranging from the musical, the heritage film, the auteur film, comedies, feminist films, and queer cinema.

The chapters cover new territory by focusing on Deneuve's 1970s roles, a decade which has been rarely studied until now. In the 1970s, Catherine Deneuve was more feminist on a personal level than was reflected in her choice of roles, which, for the most part, were anti-feminist. These contradictions should be viewed against the backdrop of the contradictory nature of the 1970s' French political conservative agenda. The 1970s witnessed Deneuve in heterosexually normative films shot by mostly male directors, at a time when female directors are beginning to make their ascent. In these films, the characters she plays are seemingly emancipated, yet ultimately shown as contained or punished by the norms of patriarchy. It is only in the 1980s that her roles will open to the possibility of "alternative female desires beyond the heterosexual frame" (p. 88).

The corpus of films covered is highly selective and navigates between famous and less famous films that have not necessarily traveled well across time and countries. For instance, *Courage fuyons*, *A nous deux*, and *Zig Zig* are examples of lesser known films. Whereas directors-auteurs are heavily referenced in earlier essays, some of the later chapters side-step any reference to directors and their importance in

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Deneuve's film career. The films mentioned before were respectively directed by two French directors Claude Lelouch, Yves Robert, and Hungarian-born actor/director László Szabó.

Some of the essays echo or speak to each other and yet they each present their own personal take on the actress's career, nor do they speak in one voice. Some readers may consider Deneuve as the ultimate French woman icon, yet she is a true transnational artist, working in different national cinemas such as Italy and Spain, constantly renewing and defending her image and "star-text" (or what constitutes a star--the personal, but also the body of essays, reviews, and comments written about her). Over the past four decades, she has also avoided the traditional pitfalls reserved to female actresses, which is to become obsolete by the time they reach a mature age. An emblematic figure in European cinema, she has definitely come to embody some of the cross-fertilization currents that were visibly present in '60s and '70s filmmaking, with multiple Franco-Italian co-productions and casts. It is interesting that her career transcends the space of French national cinema and that the appreciation of the actress is filtered through the grid of a European perspective.

Sue Harris' chapter (six) pays close attention to the heritage film--a genre in which Deneuve best showcases Frenchness--a trait that she has come to embody. She did not participate extensively in the heritage film tradition--this was reserved for high budget, historical dramas, showcasing famous actors and sets. Yet this films are highly important in view of the reorganization of French studios and the French star system of the 1980s in the Mitterrand era. *Fort Saganne*, *Le dernier Métro*, and *Indochine* are all vehicles for Deneuve that exported the notion of Frenchness abroad. Constantly cast against Gérard Depardieu, but unlike this male actor who embodies mostly historical 'star' figures, Deneuve's roles are mostly fictional heroines. It is in the heritage genre that Deneuve's career coalesces and provides continuity, although some have perceived it as a discontinuity. Some of her roles play to her personal life, or wink at the roles she has played earlier, a consequence of Deneuve's star baggage. As a heritage film star, she is often a sexually repressed woman, a maternal heroine yet without biological children, sacrificing her life for a greater cause and acting like a symbolic Marianne, the emblem of France. It is usually at the level of sexuality that the heroine (in her films) fails and collapses. Again, Deneuve is constantly scripted at the intersection of purity and perversion.

The second part of the book is devoted to the more mature Deneuve of the 1990s and 2000s, and covers her career with director Téchiné (chapter seven), her roles as a lesbian (chapter nine), and finishes with her role as a fashion icon in French culture (chapter ten). Deneuve's career takes a turn with Téchiné and evolves into a real partnership with the filmmaker. She plays in five of his films, an unprecedented number, with the exception of her earlier work with Demy. Bill Marshall's essay highlights this complex and subtle relationship between a director and his 'fetish star' as well as drawing earlier roles. The study here moves slightly away from star studies criticism to encompass a more gender- and identity-based approach inflected by an interesting Deleuzian reading.

In the last essay: "Belle toujours: Deneuve as fashion icon," Fiona Handyside argues that the staying power of Deneuve's glamorous image is due to her off-screen relationships with advertising and the media, rather than her film roles. As other essays intimated, many of her on-screen roles have a tendency to show her at her worst--degraded, or just plain and dowdy; the "cardigan narrative" discussed by Marshall (114). Instead, "her fashion-icon status has been maintained from the 1960s to the 2000s through fashion editorial and advertising" (168). It is that image of stardom which implies ultimate Frenchness for the popular audience. This last essay proposes an approach to fashion and costume that is traditionally not explored academically.

From all these essays emerges a complex, multifaceted actress who has worked with key directors across the international, European and national spectrum, is unafraid to take roles that go against a certain type-cast created for her by some of the more traditional films as well, as the iconic image constructed by the press. While reading these essays, the reader cannot help but screen her own private

'mental' theatre filled with phantom images of Deneuve in her many performances.[2] The selection of essays composing the volume, as varied as they are, could not have encompassed the entire corpus of Deneuve's films, especially if one counts over one hundred and fifty screen presences. Among some films that were bypassed, and which could have been integrated, might be Jacques Demy's *L'événement le plus important depuis que l'homme a marché sur la lune?* (1973), an investigation of gender politics and motherhood starring both Deneuve and Mastroianni. By isolating Deneuve's Italian roles, the writer overlooks some of the French roles Mastroianni played with Deneuve in French films. Also, a fascinating television film by Jean-Louis Hubert *La Reine blanche* (1991), evoked the (post) colonial drama of France--an aspect left untouched in the present study--and provided a transformative Deneuvian performance as a former beauty queen, now mother and housewife, in Brittany. Jean-Paul Rappeneau's *La vie de chateau* (1965) constitutes one of the early apparitions of Deneuve as the iconic symbol of France, the Marianne effigy, in an unpretentious film devoted to World War II, the resistance and D-Day.

As far as a queer approach to Deneuve is possible, Andrew Asibong's essay, "The killing of sister Catherine: Deneuve's lesbian transformations," opens many doors to future interpretation. The film *Paroles et musique (Love Songs)* by Elie Chouraqui (1984) may reverse the perspective, as it proposes unpredictable queer roles for her male lover and his boyfriend, interpreted respectively by Christophe Lambert and Richard Anconina. Similarly, *Indochine* (Wargnier 1993) could be considered a queer film, especially in the way it establishes the impossible white couple, Deneuve and Perez.

The scope of the essays is not limited to Deneuve's film career with a single auteur. The study incorporates an analysis of her persona, as it emerges from the sum of her films, since a star is not just a static object but composed of many complex layers which are constantly shifting and are often contradictory. The study of Deneuve will benefit film scholars and students in film and French studies as well as a more general reader interested in French cultural productions. It sheds a welcoming new glance at Deneuve's career and persona and situates her in French and transnational cinema.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS:

Lisa Downing, "Polanski's Deneuve: 'frigidity' and feminism"

Peter William Evans, "Beñuel blonde"

Susan Weiner, "Demy and Deneuve: the princess and the post-'68 fairy tale"

Pauline Small, "Deneuve's Italian interludes"

Bridget Birchall, "Incongruous femininity: Catherine Deneuve and 1970s political culture"

Sue Harris, "'Madame La France': Deneuve as heritage icon"

Bill Marshall, "Of faces and roles: Deneuve-Téchiné"

Cristina Johnston, "Deneuve in the 1990s"

Andrew Asibong, "The killing of sister Catherine: Deneuve's lesbian transformations"

Fiona Handyside, "Belle toujours: Deneuve as fashion icon"

## NOTES:

[1] Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: BFI, 1998), p.63.

[2] While checking some of the bibliographical references, I noticed that the famous site on Deneuve, “toutsurdeneuve” has changed to [www.toutsurdeneuve.free.fr](http://www.toutsurdeneuve.free.fr).

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