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Imagining British Film Beauty: Gender and National Identity in 1920s ‘Star Search’

Contests

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Abstract

In the late 1910s and 1920s, a number of British national newspapers were involved in competitions to find potential stars for the British cinema. These ‘star search’ contests were aimed predominantly at young women. Often run in collaboration with British film producers, the competitions reflected, and sought to capitalise on, a moment of optimism about the prospects of the British production sector on the world market. But, as the language used to promote the contests made clear, the winners were also expected to embody a specifically British version of femininity, which would allow them to compete successfully with their Hollywood rivals. Focussing on the publicity surrounding one early scheme, the ‘Screen Beauty’ competition promoted by Pathé and the *Express* newspapers in 1920, this article examines the role of the British popular press in contributing to a gendered image of film stardom in the years immediately after the First World War.

Keywords

film history; British cinema; stardom; beauty contests; gender

Introduction

The 1910s saw the development in the UK of a widespread popular film culture. This included fan magazines, ‘how-to’ guides to screenwriting and acting, early star biographies

and other ‘picture player’ memorabilia, as well as references to films in popular songs, music hall sketches and novels. As Andrew Shail argues (in the second part of this special issue), much of the discourse surrounding film in this period worked to feminise the medium of cinema, and this was reinforced by the language and imagery adopted by fan magazines and advertisers, who tended to assume that women made up the major share of the regular audience for films. In the 1920s, the importance of the ‘woman patron’ to cinema exhibitors and producers became an accepted part of British film industry wisdom. Women’s status as the ‘chief patrons’ of picture theatres, Marjory Williams wrote in the *Kinematograph Weekly* in 1925, was ‘a fact as patent as it is easy to explain’: Williams judged that, for the majority of women, a trip to the cinema represented one of the few opportunities to escape temporarily from domestic routine, caring responsibilities or monotonous paid labour (1925, 47).

My focus in this article is on the years immediately after the end of the First World War, especially 1919 and 1920. I show that these years were a key moment when the discursive feminisation of cinema was taken up by the proprietors of British national newspapers, who were eager to capitalise on the popularity of cinema in order to build its female readership. As I explain in more detail below, one of the ways in which British film culture and the commercial imperatives of newspapers converged was in the format of the ‘star search’ competition. This was a specialist kind of beauty contest, not limited to the UK, that aimed to identify new stars for the screen. In 1920, British newspaper beauty contests expanded into elaborate multimedia events, thanks to the involvement of newsreel and cinemazine producers, and also owing to the increasing overlap between the news and film businesses more generally, as newspaper proprietors began to invest in various wings of the film industry.

I have argued elsewhere that ‘star search’ contests were an important aspect of the ‘participatory’ culture that grew up around cinema and the profession of film acting in the

1910s and 1920s (O'Rourke 2017, 99–178). In this article, I look closely at one particular 'star search', the 'Screen Beauty' contest, which was organised by Pathé Frères and advertised extensively in the *Daily Express* and *Sunday Express* newspapers throughout much of 1920, in order to consider how women were interpolated by the interwar media as consumers, potential film stars and film experts. The article then examines how British national identity was constructed in the commentary surrounding the contest, along with the particular kinds of femininity that the promoters of the 'Screen Beauty' scheme imagined would be appropriate for a distinctly British form of film stardom.

Newspapers, beauty contests and popular film culture

The national film 'star search' contests that emerged in the UK during the 1910s and 1920s were the product of several converging strands of the mass media that targeted women as their primary consumers. Since the 1890s, the British daily press had looked for ways to increase its female readership. Alfred Harmsworth, the future Lord Northcliffe, was especially influential in this regard. Departing from the conventional wisdom that daily newspapers should consist primarily of political and financial news addressed to a metropolitan male audience, Northcliffe believed that catering to 'ordinary' men and, especially, women was crucial to the long-term success of his papers (Chalaby 2000). To this end, the *Daily Mail*, which he founded in 1896, followed the practice of Sunday papers in broadening the range of subjects considered newsworthy to include more 'human interest' stories. It also featured special women's columns from its first issue, with a strong focus on traditionally 'feminine' topics, such as cooking, fashion and beauty tips ("Women's Realm" 1896, 7). Going a step further, when Northcliffe launched the *Daily Mirror* in 1903, it was intended as a newspaper aimed specifically at women, which would reflect 'women's interests, women's thought, [and] women's work' throughout (Harmsworth 1903, 1).

Although this experiment failed commercially, resulting in the *Mirror* being rebranded as a more general-interest illustrated paper the following year, Northcliffe continued to see women as a key market. Adrian Bingham argues that, over the course of a few decades, Northcliffe's approach to journalism 'moved the female reader from the margins to the centre of editorial calculations' in the British mass-circulation press (2004, 23).

Not only were female readers increasingly relied upon to boost newspaper circulation, women were also seen as especially valuable from the perspective of consumer brands and department stores, whose advertising revenue underpinned the financial viability of the big national dailies by the early twentieth century. Bingham suggests that the prominence of display advertisements on the front pages, typically including images of new women's fashions and beauty products, further contributed to 'the "feminization" of the press [...] in visual terms' (2004, 32). As it became easier and cheaper to reproduce photographs, illustrations further changed the visual layout of newspapers, with the *Mail's* circulation manager advising Northcliffe in August 1913 that the public now demanded 'good pictures and large ones' in every edition (Smith 1913). Photographs of young society women, stage actresses and, later, glamorous female film stars became a mainstay of the national dailies. Bingham outlines the 'double-edged' impact of this practice, as it developed in the interwar years. On the one hand, he argues, such images helped to diffuse new types of modern womanhood to a wider public, providing a space where the 'transformation of femininity' that had apparently taken place during the First World War could be discussed. On the other hand, the increasingly sexualised images of women that appeared in the popular press in the 1920s and 1930s 'strengthened the belief that women had a special decorative role in society and should expect to be judged on their appearance' (2004, 146–147).

The newspaper beauty contests that preceded the 'star searches' of the interwar period, and that helped to shape their format, reveal how the popular press encouraged young

women, in particular, to embrace their ‘special decorative role’ and to see it as part of their distinctive contribution to the wellbeing of the nation. In 1907, the *Daily Mirror* took a cue from the *Chicago Tribune*, which had recently promoted a particularly elaborate beauty contest in the USA (Banner 1983, 257), and announced that it would be launching its own competition. Readers were invited to send in ‘photographs of all the girls and women in this country whose friends consider they are types of English loveliness’ to be assessed by an all-male panel of artists (“Who Is the Loveliest Woman in the World?” 1907, 7). As with later competitions, news of the number of entrants and their varying social backgrounds offered an ongoing story to report on, while photographs of the contestants provided the paper with visually appealing material. The eventual winner, named in 1908 as ‘The Most Beautiful Woman in England’, was 18-year-old Ivy Close (“England’s Beauty” 1908, 8–9). Her image, captured by her photographer husband, Elwin Neame, was subsequently circulated widely through commemorative picture postcards (Figure 1). In the 1910s, after performing occasionally as a singer in music halls, she went on to forge a successful career as a film actor and producer (Low 1949, 109).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1. Picture postcard of Ivy Close, the winner of the 1907–8 *Daily Mirror* beauty contest. Author’s collection.

The format of the photo beauty contest was taken up again by the same newspaper towards the end of the First World War in November 1918, when the *Mirror* began a search for the most beautiful female war worker (“£1,000 for War Work Belles” 1918, 2). As well as soliciting more pictures of young women to ‘decorate’ the newspaper’s pages, the contest allowed the *Mirror* to express its support for women who had taken on roles in nursing, factories, farms, transport and the auxiliary military services during the war, even if this contribution was presented as a temporary measure for the duration of the conflict. The

winner, announced the following January, was Miriam Sabbage. Having worked full-time as a bank clerk, as well as volunteering at a hospital in her spare time, she was described as selflessly ‘doing the work of men who have answered their country’s call’, implying a return to less ‘masculine’ pursuits in peacetime (“V.A.D. Wins” 1919, 4). Like Close before her, although with less success, Sabbage attempted to make the transition from beauty queen to film star, being cast in G.B. Samuelson’s drama *The Bridal Chair* (1919) shortly after she placed first in the contest (“From Bank Clerk to Film Star” 1919, 15; “The F.B.O. Daily Mirror Beauty Prize Film” 1919, 95). She was also promoted in fan magazines as a potential new British film star (Figure 2).

[INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE]

Figure 2. Miriam Sabbage, the winner of the 1918–19 *Daily Mirror* beauty contest, on the front cover of the fan magazine *Pictures and Picturegoer*, 26 July 1919. Author’s collection.

The career paths of Close and Sabbage indicate the changing aspirations and employment opportunities available for young women, as well as the increasingly close relationship between newspapers and popular film culture. By the time of the 1918 *Daily Mirror* contest, film-related material had already begun to permeate the pages of British newspapers, and it would become even more central as the interwar years progressed. Martin Conboy has interpreted the prevalence of film material in the press of this period as a sign that national newspapers, operating in an increasingly commercialised society, were cementing their role as ‘cultural go-betweens’ for readers (2002, 114). Certainly, newspaper proprietors were keen not to fall behind their competitors by losing touch with popular taste. In 1919, Northcliffe told the editor of the *Daily Mail* to find space for ‘more film matter with pictures’, adding, ‘I had no notion the topic of public conversation among all classes films have become’ (Northcliffe 1919).

Around this time, the convergence between the popular press and film culture in the UK entered a more intense phase, with film material moving beyond regular review columns, which even ‘elite’ papers such as *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* had instituted by 1919, and into more general news items, interviews with film producers and performers, and tips from stars on fashion, lifestyle and careers. Serialised novels set in romanticised versions of the British film industry, such as ‘The World’s Best Girl’, which appeared in the *Evening News* from February to June 1919, and ‘The Stars in Their Courses’, serialised in the *Daily Express* between June and September the same year, also sought to capitalise on the public interest in cinema, and especially its perceived popularity among young working- and lower-middle-class women. During this time, newspaper proprietors themselves began to invest more heavily in the film industry. The increasing overlap between the worlds of newspapers and film no doubt made proprietors even more eager to feed their readers’ interest in the cinema. It would also have knock-on effects for the kinds of cross-media promotions that readers and film audiences were invited to take part in over the coming years.

The *Express* newspapers and the Pathé Screen Beauty contest

Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, the Canadian entrepreneur and politician who took over the *Daily Express* during the First World War and launched the *Sunday Express* soon after it, was one of the newspaper proprietors who put considerable amounts of money into the British film industry. Over the course of 1919 and 1920, he bought up shares in two cinema chains, Provincial Cinematograph Theatres and Associated Provincial Picture Houses, and he acquired a controlling share in the British offshoot of the French company Pathé Frères (“Lord Beaverbrook and Pathé” 1920, 5). At the same time, Beaverbrook’s *Express* newspapers were involved in several national film ‘star searches’. In April 1919, the *Sunday Express*, which had been launched the previous December, announced a beauty contest

designed ‘to find a national beauty who is anxious to become a film star’ (“Opportunity for a New Film Star” 1919, 7). This contest was run along similar lines to earlier newspaper beauty contests, and it also borrowed from recent ‘star search’ competitions organised by British fan magazines. This time, young women were again invited to send in their photographs to be judged by an expert panel, which included representatives from the film industry. In a variation on the format of the photo beauty contest, short screen tests were made of the finalists by the Stoll Film Company director Maurice Elvey (“Search for New Cinema Stars” 1919, 2). The winner, named in July 1919 as the Irish-born former musical theatre performer Miss Tommy Sinclair, was also to be offered a role in an upcoming Stoll film (“Winners of the £500 Cinema Star Competition” 1919, 2; O’Rourke 2017, 106–109).¹

The following year, the *Sunday Express* and the *Daily Express* participated in a more ambitious, multimedia ‘star search’ organised by British Pathé. The ‘Quest for the Golden Girl’, or the Pathé Screen Beauty contest as it soon became known, joined several other national competitions that were launched in the early part of 1920. These included a contest promoted by the weekly newspaper *World’s Pictorial News*, in association with the British Actors’ Film Company (“Search for Ideal British Film Actress” 1920, 1),² and another scheme, known as the Golden Apple Challenge, which was promoted by Northcliffe’s *Daily Mail*, *Evening News* and *Weekly Dispatch* newspapers, together with the film company Gaumont. The cinemagazine *Around the Town* also took part, making screen tests of a selection of the entrants to be shown to a judging committee of film and theatre impresarios (“Stars of the Future” 1920, 2; O’Rourke 2017, 112–113). Like the Golden Apple Challenge, Pathé’s Screen Beauty contest also involved screen tests. But rather than asking a panel of judges to choose the winner, the decision, as an announcement in the *Daily Express* put it, was to be thrown open to ‘the ultimate judges of success – the public’, who would have the opportunity to vote for their favourite contestants (“British Beauty for the Films” 1920, 7).

In a letter to Beaverbrook written shortly after he had acquired his controlling share in Pathé, the company's joint general manager in the UK, Frank Smith, explained the origin and rationale for the Screen Beauty contest in more detail. The main aim was to increase sales figures for the weekly *Pathé Pictorial*, the cinemazine launched by the company in 1918, which typically consisted of a mixture of travel, nature, fashion, dance and trick films. Smith wrote:

We intend shortly to run a cinema Beauty Competition in conjunction with the Press, on the lines of a competition held recently in France. The selected contestants would be photographed by us in London and two would be included in each weekly edition. The general public would be asked to vote and the person receiving the greatest number of votes would receive the first prize. The person sending in the correct, or nearest, forecast of the order of the voting would receive another prize. One competition could be arranged for women and another for children. (Smith 1920)

Smith added that the contest 'should be advertised in such a way as to force the exhibitors' hands', presumably meaning that a long-running scheme, held over many months, would require cinema managers to book the *Pictorial* well in advance, in order that their patrons could follow the competition to its conclusion (Smith 1920). The suggestion of a separate contest for children was not taken up, although the company later tried to replicate the evident success of the Screen Beauty scheme with other kinds of interactive competition ("Pathe Screen Competitions Booming" 1920, 91).

The French competition that Smith mentioned in his letter to Beaverbrook was most likely the search to find 'La Plus Belle Femme de France' launched by the journalist Maurice de Waleffe at the end of 1919, which was still being heavily promoted in the pages of the daily Paris newspaper *Le Journal* when Smith was writing. De Waleffe's scheme would eventually

become the Miss France beauty pageant (Grout 2013, 55–56). In its earlier iteration, though, it took place not on stage, but on cinema screens across France and Belgium. As de Waleffe explained to readers of *Le Journal*, the contest was open to all young French women, regardless of their social standing, provided that they were willing to appear before the Éclair company’s cameras, so that short films of them could be shown to cinema audiences, who would then vote for the winner (de Waleffe 1919, 1). The most beautiful woman in France was eventually named as Agnès Souret, who won the popular vote shortly after the Pathé contest began (“Mlle Agnès Souret” 1920, 1; see also Fee 2015, 139–143).

As with de Waleffe’s scheme, the Pathé Screen Beauty competition played out over several months across newspaper pages and cinema screens. The contest was open exclusively to young women from across the UK. Instead of sending their photographs to a newspaper, entrants were required to submit them in person at participating cinemas, including those connected to Beaverbrook’s growing portfolio of exhibition companies. The trade paper *The Cinema* suggested that exhibitors would ‘clearly have countless ways in which they can turn the competition to account for their own advantage’ by advertising the contest or arranging tie-in publicity gimmicks (“An Interesting Beauty Competition” 1920, 36). Some venues also took part in the national campaign to promote the contest. A surviving item from Pathé’s newsreel, the *Pathé Gazette*, that April shows entrants excitedly handing in their photographs to the manager of the New Gallery cinema in London’s West End (“Beauty Competition AKA Pathe’s Beauty Competition” 1920). Photographs of Screen Beauty contestants and news of preliminary screen tests circulated widely throughout the spring and early summer, including images of minor celebrities, such as the dancer Joan Pickering, getting ready to face the camera (Figure 3).

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

Figure 3. The exhibition dancer Joan Pickering (centre) being directed by Walter West in the Broadwest studios in Walthamstow, while the film actor Violet Hopson looks on.

Kinematograph Weekly, 1 April 1920.

After the competition closed in June, a selection committee, comprising directors from several different British production firms, decided on a shortlist of 24 women. Screen tests of the semi-finalists were featured in editions of the *Pathé Pictorial* throughout July and August to be voted on by cinemagoers. The *Sunday Express* claimed that Pathé had distributed two million voting cards to exhibitors in advance of these semi-final rounds (“Miss K. Coulson” 1920, 7). The results of the public voting were announced weekly from August, and screen tests of the six finalists were shown in the *Pictorial* in October to be voted on again. The winner was finally announced in December as Phyllis Nadell, a 19-year-old hairdresser from Glasgow, who apparently beat her nearest rival by more than 11,000 votes (“Scotland Wins Pathé’s Great Screen Beauty Contest” 1920, 4). Unlike previous competitions, however, the Screen Beauty contest did not offer the prize of a film contract. Instead, as an early advertisement for the scheme noted, the winner would ‘retain her absolute liberty for the disposal of her professional services’ (“£1,000 in Prizes” 1920, 13). In Nadell’s case, newspapers reported the following year that she had been given more screen tests by Stoll and the British branch of Famous Players-Lasky, but it seems that a debut film role never materialised (“Mannerisms from the Screen” 1921, 9; “Miss Phyllis Nadell” 1921, 1).

Film stardom, nation and region

The Pathé Screen Beauty contest and the extensive promotional material that it generated offer a snapshot of how film stardom was imagined in British popular culture at the start of the 1920s, including the ways in which discourses of film stardom interacted with contemporary concerns about national identity and gender. Scholars of beauty pageants have

noted how participants typically become the focus of debates about appropriate feminine appearance and behaviour, as well as prompting larger questions about ‘who constitutes a “proper” representative of national identity’ (Banet-Weiser 1999, 1). Writing about the Canadian context, Patrizia Gentile has identified beauty contests as a form of ‘banal nationalism’, through which ideas about citizenship, race, community and belonging are communicated and contested (2020, 4–5). In some cases, the project of defining the nation and its borders has been an explicit part of the rhetoric surrounding beauty contests. De Waleffe’s Plus Belle Femme de France contest, for instance, was informed by his nationalist and eugenicist beliefs (Grout 2013, 55). These beliefs became even more pronounced in his later Miss France and Miss France d’Outre Mer schemes. De Waleffe hoped that these contests would provide role models of healthy, ‘traditional’ womanhood, both at home and among the racialised people of France’s colonies, with the ultimate aim of rejuvenating French society following years of ‘over-civilisation’ and the horrors of the First World War (Velmet 2014).

While the organisers of the Pathé Screen Beauty contest may have had more commercial imperatives in mind, the competition took place at a time when there was a similar preoccupation with the long-term effects of the First World War on the British population. Throughout 1920, as Billie Melman has shown, several newspapers reported on the problem of the so-called ‘surplus of women’ in the UK, referring to the significantly higher proportion of adult women in relation to men as a result of wartime casualties (1988, 18–21). Defining women almost exclusively in terms of marriage and motherhood, the idea of ‘surplus women’ was prompted by a lecture given that February by a London physician, Dr. Murray-Leslie. He argued that the post-war gender disparity was bad not only for young women, who would now struggle to find a husband, but also for the nation, because the ‘physically and intellectually fittest women in the country’ were being forced onto the labour market, instead

of directing their energies towards raising a family. One solution, according to Murray-Leslie, was to encourage such 'fine, healthy specimens of womanhood' to emigrate to other parts of the British Empire, where they could be 'valuable as wives in the colonies' ("The 1920 Girl" 1920, 9). Newspaper editors did not necessarily subscribe to these views, even if they enjoyed using them as talking points. Moreover, in contrast to the idea of emigrating to a life of domesticity in British colonies or Dominions, 'star search' contests actively encouraged young women to pursue careers in the metropole. But the idea that women were competing, either for work or the attention of men, chimed with the format of 'star searches' and the language used to promote beauty contests more broadly, which tended to emphasize the sheer abundance of women competing for first prize. Publicity for the Screen Beauty contest similarly stressed the variety of entrants and encouraged the judges (in this case, the public) to choose from among the '*embarras des richesses*' on display ("Choosing a Film Star" 1920, 5).

Questions of Britain's status in the post-First World War era informed the Screen Beauty contest in other ways, too. In particular, the competition played out against a backdrop of growing anxiety about the popularity of foreign, and especially American, films among British audiences, and the impact that this was supposedly having on audiences. American imports had, in fact, dominated the British film market since the early 1910s. But in the arguments of many interwar commentators, the success of American producers was often seen as a product of the upheavals caused by the war, which had supposedly left British filmmakers lagging behind. Commentary in the *Sunday Express* throughout 1920 followed this trend. In one of his regular laments about the state of the British cinema, the paper's film critic, G.A. Atkinson, referred to the problem of 'the dumping on these shores of hundreds of "sausage-machine" films' during the war as a result of 'American over-production' (1920, 5). This was a theme that Atkinson returned to later in the decade, when he asserted that the

tastes of British cinema audiences had become thoroughly and irreversibly ‘Americanised’ through exposure to imported films (Glancy 2006, 461). But, in the early 1920s, such concerns about the dominance of Hollywood were still mixed with a certain amount of optimism for the future of the domestic film industry, now that wartime disruptions were over. A discussion in the *Sunday Express* film column in the run-up to the contest suggested that cinemagoers in the UK were growing bored of films set against ‘foreign backgrounds’ and that any British film that ‘faithfully reflects the social atmosphere, tone, and settings of this country’ would find favour, especially among the much sought-after middle- and upper-class audience (“Seen on the Screen” 1920, 5). Another column claimed that, given a choice, ‘[m]ovie enthusiasts would just as soon see an English star as any other, provided she were equally appealing’ (“Search for a Film Beauty” 1920, 7).

The stated aim of the Screen Beauty competition was to fill the perceived demand for “home-made” stars’ by finding a British woman who could match the popular appeal of Hollywood actors (“Grace and Beauty Election” 1920, 6). The winner was therefore expected to represent Britain – or sometimes ‘England’ or the ‘British Isles’ – on both the domestic and the international stage. However, the contest also came at a time of ongoing debates about how British stars should distinguish themselves from their American counterparts or whether British producers should seek to turn their performers into stars at all. In British trade journals during this period, it was often said that simply replicating the tactics of American producers and publicists would not be effective or desirable when it came to advertising British performers, either because audiences would not accept it or because producers were sceptical about employing ‘American’ publicity methods. As Jon Burrows has shown, Alma Taylor, the leading star of the Hepworth Film Company for much of the 1910s, was promoted extensively in film publicity and fan magazines. But the company was also keen to distance her from the modern, fashionable lifestyles associated with American performers and the

supposedly democratising effects of consumer culture that they were said to embody. Instead of aligning Taylor with social mobility and modernity, Hepworth's publicists instead preferred to associate her with a more 'traditional', upper-class milieu of stately homes, kings and queens, the English countryside and the legitimate stage (Burrows 2001, 34).

The commentary around the Pathé Screen Beauty contest reflects a similar uncertainty about how to imagine a specifically British star and about what kind of femininity was appropriate for British films. On the one hand, articles in the *Express* newspapers were keen to highlight the transformative power of the film industry, and by extension the contest itself, including its ability to turn 'quite ordinary, good-looking girls' into celebrities ("British Pearl White" 1920, 7). Another article noted approvingly how 'chorus girls' from West End musical theatre shows, women from the 'great stores, teashop girls, girls from farm and factory' and 'professional girls' working in offices were all entering the competition ("Shop Girls as Film Queens" 1920, 7). The proprietors of newspapers and cinemagazines clearly felt that it was in their interests to encourage women, in particular, to identify with modern consumer culture. In the case of newspapers, the need to please advertisers was also an important factor. For instance, reports about the high number of 'shop girls' entering the contest allowed the *Sunday Express* to promote specific brands, including Selfridge's department store, which was a major sponsor ("Search for a Film Beauty" 1920, 7; Allen 1983, 37) (Figure 4).

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

Figure 4. 'Shop girls' from Selfridge's competing in the Pathé Screen Beauty contest.

Sunday Express, 21 March 1921. © British Library Board, MFM.MLD42.

Alongside commentary specifically about the Screen Beauty contest and future British film stars, newspapers, newsreels and cinemagazines continued to capitalise on the glamour associated with Hollywood. This can be seen especially in the coverage of Mary Pickford and

Douglas Fairbanks's marriage in the spring of 1920 and their subsequent visit to the UK that June. In the *Sunday Express*, for instance, the journalist Hannen Swaffer reported on the home life of the newly married 'King and Queen of the Films' in a front-page article illustrated with photos of their California mansion (Swaffer 1920, 1, 4). When the couple arrived in the UK that summer, Pathé cameras recorded the couple disembarking at Southampton, visiting Wimbledon and being mobbed by crowds of fans outside the Ritz Hotel. Soon after the couple landed, the *Daily Express* reminded its readers that the Screen Beauty contestants were 'possible rivals of Mary Pickford' ("Queens of Beauty and Grace" 1920, 5), and Hollywood stars like Pickford, Pauline Frederick and Pearl White continued to provide journalists and publicists with examples of the international celebrity that awaited the contest's winner.

If the Screen Beauty contest attempted to tap into the pleasures and promises of a burgeoning transatlantic celebrity culture, its organisers also tried to appeal to more local identities. Early in the contest, it was suggested that the contestants would first be judged at a district level, which was how both de Waleffe's contest in France and the rival Golden Apple Challenge were organised ("£1,000 in Prizes" 1920, 13). Although Pathé's plans evidently changed, promotional articles continued to inform readers about the geographical and social backgrounds of the women entering the contest, and there were numerous attempts to arouse feelings of regional pride. A *Daily Express* journalist remarked, that, while the scheme was taking place 'on national lines', it was likely that 'when the semi-finals are reached the spirit of local patriotism will be keenly aroused', suggesting that rivalries among 'the big manufacturing centres' or between 'London and the provinces' would add extra interest to the public vote ("Why Children Go to the Cinema" 1920, 3). Newspaper descriptions of the finalists also included references to local industries and stereotypes. Elsa Holmes, a finalist from Nottingham, was said to be as 'fine and dainty as the lacework of her home town',

while Phyllis Nadell, the eventual winner, was described as a typical ‘Scotch lassie’ (“Nottingham Girl Is Fairest of Four” 1920, 10; “Her Face May Be Your Fortune” 1920, 3).

As with other beauty contests, the format of the Screen Beauty competition worked to smooth over local differences by presenting them in terms of a shared national identity (Banet-Weiser 1999, 6–7). The ‘imagined community’ of the contest was visualised by the *Sunday Express* in a special ‘Map of Beauty and Grace’, which featured portraits of a selection of entrants overlaid onto a map of England and Wales (“The Pathé Map of Beauty and Grace” 1920, 8) (Figure 5). It is also notable, given the news that was coming out of Ireland throughout 1920, involving the emergence of an independent state and the deployment of British troops to suppress the nationalist movement, that the contest promoters went out of their way to remind Irish women that they were also eligible, by dint of their ‘British nationality’ (“£1,000 in Prizes” 1920, 13). Overall, the contest offered readers and cinema audiences a reassuring image of British national unity, as well as seeking to encourage patriotic interest in building a successful domestic film industry.

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

Figure 5. ‘The Pathé Map of Beauty and Grace’, *Sunday Express*, 19 April 1920, 8. © British Library Board, MFM.MLD42.

Choosing a British ‘Venus of the films’

The screen tests that Pathé made of the semi-finalists and finalists to show in weekly editions of the *Pictorial* also presented a particular construction of national identity. This was centred on ideas of tradition and the British or, more accurately, the English countryside. Newsreel footage shows contestants visiting studios in London, and Pathé producers were also sent to Manchester and Cardiff to make screen tests for the benefit of a selection committee (“Pathé’s Beauty Competition” 1920, 102; “Pathé’s Beauty Ballot” 1920, 121).³ In the end,

though, the screen tests that cinema audiences were asked to vote on were filmed amid the well-manicured grounds of various country estates in the English Home Counties and Midlands. These locations evoked a bucolic image of British national identity and femininity that was closer to the ‘English heritage country’ mapped out by Hepworth’s promotion of Alma Taylor (Burrows 2001, 34), rather than the more modern, commercialised world of shop girls and chorus girls hinted at in newspaper coverage. Much was made of the historic associations of the locations, which included the ‘old-world garden’ of a country mansion, a hall that once belonged to royalty and that was now owned by the Countess of Limerick, and Lord Beaverbrook’s own country home at Cherkley Court in Surrey (“Queens of Grace and Beauty” 1920, 5; “Pathé Beauty Competition” 1920, 76–77) (Figure 6).

[INSERT FIGURE 6 HERE]

Figure 6. Filming a Pathé screen test in the grounds of Cherkley Court. *Sunday Express*, 11 July 1920. © Reach PLC.

Within these settings, contestants were filmed in ways that were designed to show off their beauty and, to a lesser extent, their emotional range. Other ‘star search’ competitions in this period required finalists to perform short dramatic scenes. The Pathé films were less demanding, although several of the entrants take the opportunity to show their command of facial expressions. As part of her screen test, for instance, the contestant F.G. Horton demonstrates her ability to move quickly between a look of ‘sorrow’ and one of ‘gladness’ (“Pathe’s Beauty Contest 2” 1920). Some of the screen tests resembled the more revealing, sexualised poses that were becoming common in interwar newspapers and that were also a feature of later cinemagazines (Bingham 2004, 150–154; Hammerton 2001, 55–74). A screen test that has not survived in the archive showed one contestant in a bathing costume next to a river (Figure 7), while the future film star Mabel Poulton – renamed Lillian for the duration

of the competition, because of her similarity to the American star Lillian Gish – was shown feeding goldfish in a Japanese-style garden (“Queens of Beauty and Grace” 1920, 5).

[INSERT FIGURE 7 HERE]

Figure 7. The Screen Beauty contestant Doris Shirley preparing for her screen test. Mabel ‘Lillian’ Poulton and Cynthia Cambridge are also pictured. *Sunday Express*, 27 June 1920. © British Library Board, MFM.MLD42.

Surviving *Pathé Pictorial* films tend to show women against pastoral woodland backdrops or lounging on the lawns of country estates. Several screen tests suggest the influence of the pictorialist tendency that was notable elsewhere in British silent filmmaking, as represented in films such as Hepworth’s *Comin’ Thro’ the Rye* (1923) or Arthur Rooke’s *The Lure of Crooning Water* (1920) (Gledhill 2003). The contestant Molly McLeod, for instance, is filmed looking out from a picturesque balcony, surrounded by flowers and foliage in a way that resembles Rooke’s painterly treatment of the star Ivy Duke (“Pathe’s Beauty Contest 2” 1920). Other contestants, including Phyllis Nadell, are also shown next to flowers, underlining the comparison between women and the carefully cultivated, decorative beauty of the English garden. A more elaborate set-up places Dolly Close (the sister of the *Daily Mirror* beauty queen, Ivy) in the middle of an ornamental lake, wearing white robes in imitation of a classical statue (“Pathe’s Beauty Contest 3” 1920). As Michael Williams (2013) has argued, classical iconography like this figured prominently in the promotional and fan discourses surrounding Hollywood stars in the 1920s, helping variously to support cinema’s claims to the status of art or to legitimise the erotic appeal of stardom. In this case, Close is also being presented as an example of ‘timeless’ female beauty. Other women are associated with more modern forms of femininity, although these are generally marked as aristocratic. Like several other contestants, Elsa Holmes appears dressed in glamorous furs for her screen test, while Aileen Mascall is shown sitting demurely by the edge of a tennis

court, imitating an upper-class lady of leisure (“Pathe’s Beauty Contest” 1920; “Pathé’s Beauty Contest 3” 1920).

As part of their promotion of the competition, and in line with the expansion of film-related material in interwar newspapers, the *Express* papers devoted numerous articles to advising women on what kinds of skin tone, facial features, hairstyle and eye colour photographed best for the screen. This formed one aspect of a larger concern with classifying different ‘types’ of femininity that is notable elsewhere in the popular press in 1920. Dr Murray-Leslie’s lecture on the post-war gender imbalance distinguished between ‘domestic’, ‘intellectual’ and ‘social butterfly’ ‘types’ of women, which he thought, applying a spurious evolutionary logic, were the ‘direct outcome of sex disproportion’ in the population (“The 1920 Girl” 1920, 9). In October, the *Sunday Express* also reported on statements made by the photographer E.O. Hoppé, who argued that a more modern type of womanhood, represented by ‘the athletic girl, the wholesome, healthy maiden’, was the logical twentieth-century successor to the classical beauty standards represented by the Venus de Milo. The swimmer and film actor Annette Kellerman was held up as the woman who best embodied this new ideal (“Venus Dethroned by the Twentieth Century Beauty” 1920, 10). Asked to give advice to women entering the Pathé contest, the British film producer George Pearson, who was one of the members of the competition’s selection committee, contributed his thoughts about the most photogenic type of female beauty. Rather than advocating a slim, athletic physique for women, he explained that successful female film stars had ‘rounded’ figures ‘pleasingly free from angularities’. They also had small facial features, including ‘rose-bud’ mouths, and dark eyes that registered well on camera. He added that, in his view, bobbed haircuts were an ‘abomination’ and a ‘fatal mistake’ for aspiring film actresses (“Venus of the Films” 1920, 1). Another newspaper article collated opinions about the ‘Ideal Film Complexion’. In particular, it asked whether the supposedly natural ‘peaches and cream’ skin tone of English

women was a help or a hindrance in front of the camera (“Ideal Film Complexion” 1920, 4). As Jessica Clark shows, the association of fair skin with ideas of ‘naturalness’ and purity had long been actively reinforced by British advertisers and beauty experts, in their efforts to promote ‘an idealized image of white bourgeois beauty’ to consumers (Clark 2020, 8). Here, though, it is suggested that the ‘chief beauty’ of ‘English girls’ – their ‘natural colouring’ – may render them unsuitable for the screen (“Ideal Film Complexion” 1920, 4). Like Pearson’s comments, the article shows how discussion of female beauty standards in relation to film was often framed as a purely technical debate about which types of women could be photographed most effectively, obscuring the larger ideological imperatives and hierarchies of race and class at play. For instance, Pearson’s assertion that only small, dainty facial features were suitable for the screen implicitly reinforced western beauty standards, while his dismissive remarks about bobbed haircuts indicate his suspicion of new types of femininity associated with modern young women..

Throughout the coverage of the Pathé contest, both male and female readers and cinemagoers were positioned as discerning judges of women’s appearances and personalities, who could use their knowledge of popular film culture to decide which contestants would be successful as stars. The audience’s choice of winners for the semi-final rounds suggests a preference for more modern styles of femininity over the ‘timeless’ classical beauty embodied by contestants such as Dolly Close. In the final round of screen tests, the runner-up, Cynthia Cambridge, is shown wrapped in a fur coat, wearing a fashionable dress, with her hair cut short (contrary to Pearson’s advice). The winner, Phyllis Nadell, who also has a shorter haircut, is framed in a close-up shot that shows off her carefully shaped eyebrows and use of lipstick, as she smiles for the camera (“British Screen Beauty Search” 1920; “Beauty Competition” 1920). Another photograph of Nadell printed in the *Sunday Express*, alongside news of her screen test for Famous Players-Lasky, further presented her as a glamorous and

possibly international film star in the making (Figure 8). At the same time, the caption that accompanied the photo, which included the incongruous detail that Nadell still had a taste for ‘real Scotch porridge’, sought to reassure readers that she had not lost her local identity, despite pursuing her dreams of stardom in London’s film studios (“Miss Phyllis Nadell” 1921, 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 8 HERE]

Figure 8. Phyllis Nadell, the winner of the Pathé Screen Beauty contest. *Sunday Express*, 6 February 1921. © British Library Board, MFM.MLD42.

Conclusion

The beauty contests and ‘star search’ competitions organised by British newspaper and film companies undoubtedly contributed to the gendering of the popular image of film stardom in the UK as feminine at the start of the 1920s. While similar fan magazine contests occasionally extended their schemes to men aspiring to be film actors, film historiography has discovered no ‘star search’ associated with the national daily or Sunday press that did so. Instead, the organisers focussed their attention exclusively on young women, seeing such competitions as ways to increase their circulation among female readers by capitalising on the widespread interest in cinema and the lives of film performers that had developed in the preceding decade. These contests also provided newspaper editors with a legitimate reason for printing visually appealing photographs of young women to adorn their pages, which they hoped would attract male readers. As Bingham argues, while women in the interwar press were not necessarily pictured more than men, they were typically ‘put on view not for what they had achieved but for what they were wearing or how they looked’, so that readers were ‘invited to examine the clothed body and the smiling face in aesthetic terms’ (2004, 145–146). In the case of photo beauty contests, readers were quite literally invited to adopt an

evaluative gaze, being asked to decide whether they preferred tall or short women, blonde or brown hair, blue, green or hazel eyes.

Cinemagazines similarly encouraged viewers to scrutinise the women entering the contests for their beauty, as well as for their acting talent and evidence of their personality. For female cinemagoers following the Screen Beauty contest, this might involve measuring their own attractiveness against that of the candidates. Women who thought they would do equally well in front of the camera could submit their photograph the next time they passed the box office, and everyone could fill in a ballot card when the time came to register their approval. It was this emotional investment that film producers were eager to foster by taking part in ‘star searches’, hoping that it would translate into regular cinema attendance and devotion to their particular brand.

In the context of interwar Britain, the task of inspiring enthusiasm for films was often caught up with the desire to create an audience for a distinctive national cinema, which would be able to compete with the economic dominance of American imports by making use of domestic stories, settings and stars. As well as representing the transformative possibilities of the mass media, the young women whose images appeared in the pages of the *Express* and as items in the *Pathé Pictorial* and *Gazette* were thus also being asked to embody a sense of youthful optimism for the future of the British film industry. However, there is a tension evident in the commentary surrounding the Screen Beauty contest about who the ideal film star for a rejuvenated British cinema would be. While the early coverage in the *Sunday Express* tended to locate film stardom within a commercialised world of department stores and West End theatres, populated by fashionable, modern young women, the Pathé screen tests presented a more ‘traditional’ and genteel image of femininity, linked to ideas of heritage, the British (or English) countryside and the aristocracy. This can be seen as part of a more general ambivalence in British film discourse, and in other aspects of interwar popular

culture, towards the apparently homogenising effects of consumerism and celebrity, and a suspicion of the challenges they represented to established ways of imagining class and gender.

Despite the emphasis on tradition and ‘old-world’ charm evident in the *Pathé Pictorial*’s construction of female stardom, the Screen Beauty contest was also a very modern innovation that relied on careful coordination among the popular press, cinemagazines, newsreels and cinema exhibitors. The attempt to gauge public opinion about potential stars through a popular vote anticipates the efforts in market research undertaken by British exhibitors, such as Sidney Bernstein, later in the decade. There were several more ‘star search’ contests in the 1920s, some of which were equally ambitious (O’Rourke 2017, 114–124). However, in common with the Screen Beauty competition, none of them fulfilled their promise of producing a British star who could match the popularity of Mary Pickford. What they did succeed in doing, though, in addition to boosting newspaper and cinemagazine sales figures, was to amplify the links between film and beauty culture that were already a feature of fan discourse, and to promote this association to an even larger audience. In this way, ‘star searches’ implicitly coded the raw materials of cinema not just as female in general but also as a youthful, to-be-looked-at version of femininity in particular.

Note on Contributor

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Notes

1. The work of the judging committee for the 1919 *Sunday Express* ‘star search’ was filmed by the Pathé newsreel cameras and can be seen on the British Pathé online archive (‘Beauty Competition – Photographs 1914-1918’ [1919]). The woman inspecting the photographs of contestants is the American stage actor Doris Keane.
2. Thanks to Matthew Sanders for making me aware of the *World’s Pictorial News* competition.
3. See *Pathé’s Screen Beauty Competition* (1920), BFI National Archives item 20261, which shows the contestant Cynthia Cambridge on a visit to the Welsh-Pearson studio, and which is included as an extra in the BFI DVD release (2016) of the feature film *Shooting Stars* (Asquith and Bramble, 1927).

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