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Lisa Bode 

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## FORUM

### Fade out/fade in: dead 1920s and 1930s Hollywood stars and the mechanisms of posthumous stardom

Lisa Bode\*

*School of English, Media Studies and Art History, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia*

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In her work on the circulation of posthumous fame discourses around Hollywood film actors' graves, Linda Levitt writes that: 'stardom persists for only a handful of iconic performers, as fame typically diminishes without the workings of the culture machine' (2010, p. 70). She shows how this machine operates in the particular context of dark tourism, as it weaves strands from star biographies and lurid tales from Kenneth Anger's (1975 cited Levitt 2010, p. 64) *Hollywood Babylon* into narratives of reverence and morbidity. But her work also prompts further questions about the extent to which the mechanisms of posthumous fame remain constant or change between different interests and eras. I offer some brief thoughts towards a broader conception of these processes, and trace lightly the posthumous fade-out of two stars who both died at the peak of their fame: Marie Dressler (d. 1934) and Wallace Reid (d. 1923). For through such long fade-outs (and tentative fade-ins), we can gain a better understanding of how the mechanisms of posthumous fame have operated during different moments of Hollywood history.

The constellation of the remembered Hollywood dead shrinks or expands depending on the context. For instance, Mark Roesler, CEO of CMG Worldwide – an agency that represents stars such as Jean Harlow and James Dean – operates as a 'consecrating agent' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 41), bestowing 'classic star' labels on lesser figures whose heirs pay him a percentage, such as Gene Tierny, Sharon Tate, and Virginia Mayo. This kind of consecration occurs wherever a star name or image can be financially leveraged. As Levitt (2006) has shown, operators in Hollywood's dark tourism routes pad their tour highlights with B-movie actors and chorines who just happen to be interred or have died in an unusual manner in the right locale, drawing them all into the embrace of both 'classic' and morbid Hollywood histories.

But in the early 1930s there was a move on the part of fan magazines to more strictly hierarchise and constrain screen immortality in the face of an ever-expanding constellation of dead or retired stars. Litanies of names of dead and retired stars had become common in newspapers and fan magazines, such as *Picture Play* and *Motion Picture Magazine*, by the late 1920s. For instance, *Picture Play* (1928) published a list of 'The Most Beautiful Women of the Screen' and



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# Additional information

## Notes on contributors

Lisa Bode

Lisa Bode is lecturer in Film and Television Studies at The University of Queensland. Her research interests include screen performance and illusionism, posthumous fame, and cultural reception. She is currently writing a book historicising screen acting in the context of visual and special effects.

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