

NPG Glamour of the Gods Talk: Ruth Harriet Louise to Eve Arnold

The story of Hollywood is fascinating. In 1905 Sunset Boulevard was just a dirt track road. Today it is a seventeen mile main road that runs through Los Angeles. By 1910 a community of film companies were emerging and by 1914 Adolph Zukor's Famous Players merged with the Lasky Company and it was not long before Paramount Pictures was created and a vertically controlled film industry evolved. Right from the beginning stars were an important ingredient to promote films. One of the earliest stars is Theda Bara who appeared in *Cleopatra*, *Carmen* and *Salome* but most of these films have vanished. However, the popularity of the comedians and in particular Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy have survived. Their films are continuously screened worldwide in a variety of formats. The sex Goddesses also seem to hold up reasonably well and in particular Gloria Swanson and Pola Negri. The iconic face of Louise Brooks remains popular too.

Stills were used to promote films in newspapers and magazines and used as art work for the poster design. Stills were also used to promote the film in campaign books and sales catalogues to entice exhibitors. One of the first stills men to arrive was Clarence Sinclair Bull who came to Hollywood in 1917. Another of the pioneers was Harry Waxman a successful New York photographer who set up a studio in Los Angeles and began to photograph many of the Hollywood stars including Gloria Swanson and Pola Negri. Waxman focused on the personality of the star as seen in Waxman's 1926 portrait of Evelyn Brett. Brett was virtually unknown but the Waxman portrait session launched her career and soon after she was signed up by Paramount.

The most important aspect of portrait photography is to convey star quality. It is the element that makes them a star. For women it is natural beauty. For men it's their masculinity or the amorous advances as seen in Buddy Longworth's portrait of Garbo and Gilbert for *Flesh and the Devil* (1926).

If we look to the right there is a still of Ruth Harriet Louise and Joan Crawford by Clarence Sinclair Bull in 1928. Harriet Louise was one of the pioneers of portrait stills. Before coming out to Hollywood to visit her brother she had a studio in New Brunswick New Jersey she was introduced to the head of publicity at MGM who was so impressed with her portraits that the 19 year old was given her own gallery at the studio. Louise didn't like the close up and preferred medium close ups and most her work was cropped and reprinted so the portrait just show the face. This has been authenticated by an interview John Kobal for *People Will Talk*. An inspection of the original negative reveals that she took medium shots. She was trusted by the stars as she was the same age as them understood their sensitivity and understood what it like

to be a woman. Greta Garbo felt awkward speaking in English but with Ruth Harriet Louise she felt comfortable.

Some of Greta Garbo's most revealing and natural photographs were by Harriet Louise. Garbo was approachable and by 1930 Garbo began to feel self-conscious. Coincidentally Harriet Louise left MGM in 1930. Unfortunately most of her subsequent material does not survive.

MGM were to replace Louise with George Hurrell who is probably the most famous Hollywood stills photographer who influenced a generation.

George Hurrell's introduction to Hollywood began in 1927 with Ramon Novarro at Laguna Beach and Novarro told the young Los Angeles photographer that he wanted to commission some creative photography. So he took some costumes over to Hurrell's studio and he photographed Novarro as a clown. They were a success and convinced Thalberg that Novarro should have some singing numbers in his next film. Thalberg's wife Norma Shearer had seen the Novarro 'snaps' and decided to commission a photo session with Hurrell in order to convince her husband she was capable of playing a sex siren. When he saw the pictures he began to take a greater interest in his wife's film career. She had transformed herself into being a goddess of the silver screen.

This in a sense became a template of how Hollywood began to manufacture a star with the aid of portraits and stills photography. Special photo sessions were set up and the star was draped in revealing costumes the fan magazines announced the upcoming films. It was a chance for the actors to work more creatively in front of the camera the photographers had to be patient with their demands but if the photographer found the right chemistry the results could be outstanding. The costume, make-up and hair styling were part of the process.

Two women who understood the importance of portrait photography were undoubtedly Marlene Dietrich and Joan Crawford. Dietrich was a technician and understood lighting. She first modeled herself in a Berlin photo booth. Marlene always ensured the light was positioned at 12 o'clock so that light shone off her forehead and illuminated her hair this technique she mastered with Josef von Sternberg and all the photographers had to follow this style when photographing the great Marlene Dietrich. Equally technical was Joan Crawford.

Crawford loved to be photographed and would spend long hours after work at MGM studio working with Hurrell. The large arc lamps were used for romantic effect as the light was directed on the face.

The censorship codes were very strict at this time but the studios and photographers had a clever way of avoiding censorship. Every portrait and still had to be submitted to the Advertising Advisory Council. The Austrian born Lazlo Willinger who was used to more liberalisation in Berlin had a trick up his sleeve. Several photographers added more revealing photos to AAC knowing a few would survive. This is how Hurrell and Howard Hughes managed to get the Jane Russell photos of the girl and the gun laying on straw through the censors in 1940. The biggest thrill for archivists is discovering the censored material!!

If you look at the portrait of Carol Lombard from 1929 in the draped position I doubt that would have got through the censors by the mid to late 30s The inside of the thigh, navels and too much cleavage was forbidden.

Another great photographer of this era was Ernest Bachrach who spent most of his career at RKO the studio who created *Citizen Kane* and *Swing Time*. Bachrach portraits can often be distinguished by angling the face or holding a particular pose- see Katherine Hepburn 1935. Bachrach used light to give a three dimensional look to the face. Bachrach used a few tricks he would get the sitter to tilt the neck backwards to give the illusion of a thin, longer neck. Similarly if the shoulders were too wide then the actor would turn their head over the shoulder.

Let's now look at the athletic Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire from the film *Swing Time* by John Miehle 1936. This is a still not a frame enlargement from the film. It is a posed still image where the actors are static for the benefit of the stills man. It is not done during the shooting but generally at the end of the take. It is a very difficult to achieve as the stills camera had a 60% slower exposure time to the moving image so actors and directors would get exasperated by what they considered time wasting. Shirley Temple hated it would insist on one take and if the stills man got it wrong she would not do the pose a second time.

On the set of *Champagne* in 1929 Alfred Hitchcock got so annoyed with the stills man that he kicked his tripod over and for two weeks did not allow a photographer to take a photograph that is until a young Michael Powell stepped in. The tea break was an opportunity for the stills man to take his stills and by prior arrangement lights were kept on sound equipment moved back and actors were begged to stay on in their own time. The stills men and women were not popular and worked in difficult situations.

Although there were tremendous advancements in the film industry the stills man was using the same plate cameras they had been using in 1929 and for them in almost a decade nothing changed. The light was a key factor to achieve that three dimensional element to the face. I have seen the way Cornel Lucas lights a set and the way he

directs the huge lamps to create atmosphere is quite remarkable. Similarly, if you look at the way Eleanor Parker leans in towards Ted Allen's camera then you begin to understand some of the portrait photographer's techniques to gain expression.

Next is Loretta Young who established five year collaboration with Frank Powlony. Powlony was born in Austria. His father taught him to use a camera as a child his father was a photographer at the imperial Court of Austria. Powlony worked at 20th Century Fox and has hired as a stills man on the iron Horse with John Ford he did the outstanding stills on F W Murnau and seventh Heaven with Frank Bozarge all of Fox's top directors. She persuaded Zanuck to allow Powlony to have his own gallery and he went on to photograph Marilyn Monroe who was as popular as Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth had been in the 1940s.

By the 1950s films were changing and the studio portrait was becoming something of the past Hollywood began to feel old fashioned. Arguably Elia Kazan changed Hollywood. *Streetcar Named Desire* and then a few years later *On the Waterfront* starring Marlon Brando was to change everything as he refused to conform to Hollywood conventions. The studios realised that putting stars under a lengthy contract was no longer profitable and with fewer stars on the studio lot there was less work for the photographer more and more films were now shot on location like the Marlon Brando film *Viva Zapata*. The heavy cameras were now longer needed and light weight cameras became fashionable

However, by 1960 Marilyn began to look over weight and in one last final attempt by Fox she did a nude photo shoot in a swimming pool on the Fox lot. Twentieth Century Fox were also desperately cooking up their publicity surrounding the affair between Liz Taylor and Richard Burton. Burton had just replaced Stephen Boyd as Mark Anthony and for the first time since the silent era Hollywood was able to generate worldwide publicity and Liz Taylor as Cleopatra was crowned the Queen of Hollywood. Yet despite the publicity the film was a box office flop and put Twentieth Century Fox into financial meltdown and forced them to sell assets and land around Century City. Similarly MGM were experiencing difficulties as well.

Arguably one of the last films to depict old Hollywood was John Huston's *The Misfits* (1961) starring Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable and Montgomery Clift. Magnum photographer Eve Arnold was given exclusive access during the filming in Nevada and the Navajo desert. Arnold was always one of Marilyn's favourite photographers and trusted her in the same way Garbo trusted Louise. Arnold of course was unaware that a short time later all three stars were to die tragically.