escapist comedy is the most valuable genre of all. Klawans perceptively observes that the film's "ostensibly confessional spirit" exists alongside a fundamentally conservative outlook, and that its nervy stylistic clashes—surprisingly awkward slapstick colliding with vivid scenes of poverty and imprisonment—debunk its ostensible message about "the triumph of the comic spirit over grim reality," exposing "the shabbiness of generic filmmaking in the very act of seeming to celebrate it" and revealing profoundly mixed feelings in Sturges himself.

Klawans's reservations about psychobiography notwithstanding, this part of his study makes excellent use of it, and when he gets to *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock*, about a man having a midlife crisis, he concedes that it can indeed be an advantageous tool, showing how Sturges's resurrection of silent-film star Harold Lloyd reflected his own urgent need to rejuvenate himself, and how Diddlebock's remedies for advancing age—booze, big spending, wild romance—were the very same Sturges was prescribing in his own case. And then there's the radically sardonic *Unfaithfully Yours*, where a crazily jealous orchestra conductor metaphorically evokes "a film director who contrives perfection when on set and makes a mess of his life when out of the studio," to quote the caption Klawans places under a priceless still of Rex Harrison wrestling with the "intractable reality" of a household gizmo. Once again, Sturges's personal dilemmas flicker within an entertainment that becomes even more complex and stylish when we detect their traces.

Klawans is a virtuoso writer and a savvy political thinker, as his reviews in *The Nation* demonstrated for years, and while the prose in *Crooked, But Never Common* doesn't always rise to the lofty standard of his best journalism, his talent for memorable insight and pithy phraseology remains intact. On the deeper meaning of Sturges's recurring character actors and stock figures: "He sparked his invention with these types and so assented to their implication: that society is a static hierarchy." On a gunfight in *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend*: "Sturges replays mirthless gags with the joy of an itchy neurotic scratching himself raw." I don't always agree with his assessments, and while his comparison of *Unfaithfully Yours* to Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 classic *Vertigo* is intriguing—it's true that both are proudly artificial, narratively unconventional, and suffused with expressive music—the notion that *Unfaithfully Yours* might be "the more inventive...and the more scathingly honest" of the two strikes me as more fantastical than anything in the plots of those admirable movies. But a critic one always concurred with would hardly open one's thinking or enlarge one's horizons. Klawans does both for me in his scrupulous study of a filmmaker who usually shot straight and was almost never common.—**David Sterritt**

The Cinema of Barbara Stanwyck:

Twenty-Six Short Essays on a Working Star

by Catherine Russell. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2023. Paperback: 368 pp., illus. $29.95.

Barbara Stanwyck once said, "Put me in the last fifteen minutes of a picture and I don't care what happened before. I don't even care if I was in the rest of the damned thing—I'll take it in those fifteen minutes." That transformative screen time speaks to the undefinable allure of the movie star, a quality that Stanwyck had in spades.

She was born Ruby Stevens and grew up as an orphan in Brooklyn. She dropped out of school at the age of fourteen and by sixteen she was on the stage, working as a chorus girl in seedy Manhattan speakeasies. Stanwyck's impoverished childhood was formative to her professionalism, which was lauded among her directors, crews, and fellow actors. It also adds verisimilitude to her independent star persona. In many ways Stanwyck was the ultimate movie star, an ordinary person who came from nothing to become an extraordinary actress and icon of the studio system. Her success represents the myth that Hollywood likes to perpetuate about itself.

But as Catherine Russell points out in her new book, Stanwyck had more than luck and a strict work ethic on her side. She was also practical and understood that Hollywood actresses had shorter shelf lives than their male peers. To thrive in such a fickle industry, she needed to continuously reinvent herself—and she did. Stanwyck's performative range lent itself to her ongoing metamorphosis; her piercing eyes and velvety voice that got deeper with age (and cigarettes) were the keys to her expressive style. She made acting look easy, but a close study of any of her over one hundred film and television performances reveals that she was methodical about her craft. Stanwyck's versatility enabled her to triumph over the structural misogyny in the film industry, and her sixty-year career is a snapshot of intertwined Hollywood and American cultural histories. In the pre-Code era, when relaxed industry regulations afforded female stars the space to embrace their sexual desires, Stanwyck played bad girls and gold-diggers in such films as *Ladies They Talk About* (1931) and *Baby Face* (1933). In the 1940s, when post-WWII cynicism melted into Cold War paranoia, she played femmes fatales and troubled housewives in *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Two Mrs. Carrolls* (1947), and *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948). Stanwyck's most strategic triumph was her midcareer transformation into a Western horsewoman-turned-matriarch in films such *The Furies* (1950), *The Maverick Queen* (1956), *Forty Guns* (1957) and, later, on television in *The Big Valley* (1965–69). Russell explains that Stanwyck's longevity was an exception to the rule of women in Hollywood.

At least a half-dozen Barbara Stanwyck biographies of various length and scope were published during her lifetime or posthumously. Russell uses the abecedary methodology—a collection of short essays organized alphabetically by key words—to distinguish her scholarship from the crowded field and unpack Stanwyck's shifting cultural meaning. Diehard Stanwyck fans and newcomers alike will benefit from Russell's unique method because, unlike a biography, Russell does not claim to "know" the private Stanwyck, a fact that's made clear in her smart discussion of Stanwyck's often-speculated lesbianism. Russell offers biographical details when they intersect with Stanwyck's stardom and performances, such as her "D" chapter about the actress's tumultuous relationship with her son, Dion, and how it informed the image of "bad" motherhood represented in *Stella Dallas* (1937). Russell weaves together the public's perception of Stanwyck with her screen identity, reminding us of the ongoing ideological and cultural negotiations involved engaging with a movie star's image.

Russell's method is also a natural fit for the single-star study, which allows for critical analysis of a star in several different contexts. In a single-star study, the star is the primary but not singular focus of the scholarship. A multifaceted star like Stanwyck becomes a vehicle for analyses of such varied topics as motherhood, cultural labor and creative agency, race and the representation of whiteness in classical Hollywood cinema, fashion and gender, and even stunts. A particularly

illuminating chapter is "B," about *The Barbara Stanwyck Show,* genre, and star power. Russell dissects the show's introductory sequence where Stanwyck—clad in the latest glamorous fashions by Daniel Werle—sets up the week's story via a direct address to the camera. Russell argues that these "unsteady" introductions are symptomatic of the show's failure to wrangle Stanwyck's spectacular movie persona for television audiences.

Russell also explores the show's allegorizing of Stanwyck's film persona and domesticity in 1940s melodrama. For example, Stanwyck introduces the story in the "Confession" episode as a "melodrama in the manner of *Double Indemnity,*" but, as Russell argues, the episode's flashback structure is similar to *Mildred Pierce* (1945). *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* was canceled after one season due to "economics of scale and the conservative power of sponsors" who abandoned the anthology format en masse in favor of serials.

Throughout the book Russell argues that unlike Stanwyck's screen heroines, the actress was not a feminist; she was an Ayn Rand devotee who "clung to a vision of self-fulfillment and competitive individualism." In 1961, however, Stanwyck adopted what Russell calls a rare "feminist position" when her show was canceled along with those starring actresses Loretta Young, Ann Sothern, and June Allyson. "I don't know who 'they' are, but they've decreed no more women on television...We all had good ratings." Russell writes that Stanwyck likely felt obligated to issue a public statement because she had a "leading role as a woman in the industry." Russell draws upon the show's industrial history to illustrate how Stanwyck deftly navigated Hollywood's embedded misogyny on her own terms, while at the same time her avowed Republican politics "makes it difficult to align her story with the progressive agenda of feminist historiography." For Russell, Stanwyck personifies the critical contradiction of women cultural heroes in that despite her image, she herself cannot meet the "feminist expectations" of a collective cultural movement.

The book's structure also enables Russell to dive into unexplored aspects of Stanwyck's illustrious career. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Stanwyck's name and image are still recognizable outside of classical Hollywood fandom, and she has what Russell calls a sizable presence in "the multimedia worlds of the twentieth century." Stanwyck has garnered an entirely new generation of fans thanks to platforms such as Turner Classic Movies, The Criterion Collection and Channel, and the popular torrent Website ok.ru. Some fans identify with the core values of her original brand, while others reconfigure her image according to their own contemporary feminist values (which she herself did not share). Russell's book is the first to examine the proprietary nature of Stanwyck's fandom.

In her "Y" chapter, she explains how Stanwyck's intensely private personality brushed up against contemporaneous fans' desire to "know" and "own" her beyond the image they saw on screen. In the classical Hollywood era, scrapbooking was a popular activity for fans to "become closer with their idols by collecting them in fragments." Contemporary fan practices are outside of the temporal scope of Russell's book, but a similar illusion of intimacy manifests in current fan circles on social media via fancams, memes, and photo archive accounts. The private Barbara Stanwyck remained elusive by design. Russell writes about an instance when her secretary sent a note to a fan club rejecting their request for her endorsement because she "has decided that it would not be at all kind to show any favoritism by accepting one or two and not the others. Therefore she has accepted none." As Russell eloquently puts it, Stanwyck did not want to be owned.

Another revelation is the "R" chapter subtitled "Riding, Falling, and Stunts," in which Russell analyzes the gendered visual spectacle of Stanwyck's horseback-riding stunt work. She argues that Stanwyck's horsewomanship encapsulates the paradox of movie stardom—her athleticism "enabled her to rise above the entrenched cultural misogyny of the industry" by reinforcing her independent star persona, but at the same, it signified the "illusion and deception" of Hollywood filmmaking. Russell reminds us that Stanwyck was an expert horsewoman in real life and publicly insisted on doing her own stunt work because it "contributed to the consistency of characterization." Many of her stunts, however, were performed by a double. After a serious fall on the set of *Forbidden* (1932), Stanwyck had a clause added to a subsequent freelance contract prohibiting her from riding horses on camera. Russell makes the case that Stanwyck's stunt work was often tied to her gender—for example, her characters' tendency to fall off their horses "just to be saved by men."

Contemporaneous film critics marveled at Stanwyck's "trim and slim" physique in her form-fitting Western costumes, often the result of strict food intake, like her all-celery diet for *A Message to Garcia* (1936) or rare steak and black coffee in the 1960s. The misogynistic discourse surrounding Stanwyck's "unwomanly" roles did not dissuade the actress from forging a path for herself in the genre because it "made a space for older women...outside the comforts of urban life." Other Stanwyck studies have analyzed her Western performances, but few have addressed how her gender informed the public's perception of her star persona. This chapter is just one of many examples where Russell offers readers rich cultural context, grounding Stanwyck's familiar image in the evolving discourse about women's agency in Hollywood.

It's a testament to Barbara Stanwyck's immense talent and charisma that she continues to elicit continuing public fascination and critical re-evaluation more than thirty years after her death. Catherine Russell's *The Cinema of Barbara Stanwyck* adds illuminating dimension to the actress's complex life story and equally vaunted career. Her meticulously researched and thoughtful analysis brings a fresh perspective to Stanwyck's legacy, and captures the enduring power and charm of the classical Hollywood movie star.—**Olympia Kiriakou**

Continental Films:

French Cinema under German Control

by Christine Leteux. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022. 253 pp., illus. Hardcover: $39.95.

The years of Germany's Occupation of France, 1940–1944, though not the height of French cinema, were a remarkably vibrant period. Over two hundred films were produced over the four years and, with the departure into exile of filmmakers such as René Clair, Julien Duvivier, and Jean Renoir, along with stars Jean Gabin, Simone Simon, and Michèle Morgan, room was opened for new directors and actors. Robert Bresson was most notable among the former, directing his first feature-length film, *Les anges du péché,* in 1943 after his release from a POW camp.

The most prolific production company in Occupied France was Continental Films, which turned out thirty feature films. Among them were light fare that has faded from history, skillful adaptations of novels by Georges Simenon, and a handful of unquestionable classics, among them Henri-Georges Clouzot's *The Murderer Lives at Number 21* (1942) and *Le Corbeau* (1943). Its stable of directors included established figures like Maurice Tourneur, Christian-Jaque, and Henri Decoin. But Continental also gave Clouzot, an experienced screenwriter, his first directing opportunity with *The Murderer Lives at Number 21.* Continental's screenwriters included the most prestigious and sought-after figures of the craft, including Jean Aurenche, Pierre Bost, and Charles Spaak. Continental's regular stable of actors included stars like Danielle Darrieux, Pierre Fresnay, Alfred Préjean, Harry Baur, Fernandel, and Raimu, while other great actors, like Arletty, Michel Simon, and Jean-Louis Barrault appeared in Continental productions.

Continental was in many ways at the forefront of French cinema, but there was a hitch—Continental was a wholly German-owned company, backed to the hilt by Goebbels's propaganda ministry. The history of this German-run yet oh-so-French company, its films and its twisted relations