



Playing with Fire: A Counter-Factual History of *Fallen Angel*

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In his film noir *Fallen Angel* (1945), Otto Preminger depicts a passionate love triangle. Eric Stanton (Dana Andrews) is a stone-broke New York drifter and self-proclaimed press agent who reaches Walton, a small California beach town. There he hooks up with two local women: June Mills (Alice Faye) is an upright girl, who shares a house with her older sister, the dominant spinster Clara (Anne Revere); whereas Stella (Linda Darnell) is a part-time waitress and full-time femme fatale, firmly searching for a ticket out of Walton.

On their first night out, Eric and Stella end up in a shady taproom, where he tries to seduce her by reading her palm lines.

Eric: “You’ve got style. Beautiful style. You inherited that.”

A cut to a reverse shot reveals Stella’s disparaging look.

Eric: “Your father was a leading citizen. Rich.”

She sniggers, as Eric continues.

Eric: “He trusted people too much.”

Stella: “And?”

A cut to Eric.

Eric: “Your mother ... well, her line seems to run out.”

Another reverse shot allows Stella to react.

Stella: “Don’t scare me! She runs a boarding house in San Diego, and my old man came from a long line of drunks!”

As she pronounces these last lines, Stella retains the scornful look that, over the years, would become one of Linda Darnell’s trademarks. This characteristic look always appeared intensely contemptuous, in line with the femme fatales she would inimitably portray throughout her career. As Jeanine Basinger explains, once Twentieth Century Fox had discovered the role that fitted her, Darnell would incessantly embody the “low-class, down-and-out babe who knew that her looks were her only bargaining chip.”^[1] In this particular shot, however, her facial expression intrigues me more than usual. Even more than the intensity of the look itself, my curiosity is tickled because, immediately after Darnell has articulated these last words, she appears to directly glance at someone in the off-screen space, apparently situated behind and to the side of Andrews. This brief glance adds something indefinable to the shot – something that exceeds the fictional world and linear narrative of the film.

My fascination for this fleeting glance fits the contours of what Paul Willemen has coined the “cinephiliac moment.”^[2] According to Willemen, the spectatorial enchantment instigated by ephemeral moments within films is typical for the cinephile viewing experience. In a conversation with Willemen, Noel King admitted that, when watching Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* (1954), he was strongly fascinated by Marlon Brando’s bits of business with the glove that had, apparently accidentally, slipped out of Eva Marie Saint’s hand. King argued that in cinephiles’ descriptions of films, “there is always the fetishising of a particular moment, the isolating of a crystallisingly expressive detail.”^[3] Willemen subsequently put forward the idea that the experience of a cinephiliac

moment, although part of a very specific viewing strategy, is by definition highly idiosyncratic. The regularity nonetheless lies in the fact that the ecstatic reaction the moment evokes symbolises an intense bond with the film and, by extension, with the medium of cinema. Willemen therefore argued that “the difference in selection is less important than the fact that you are signalling the relationship of pleasures generated between you and the screen, generated by that particular film.”^[4]

In that same conversation, Willemen traced the origins of the cinephiliac moment back to the notion of *photogénie*, which was invented by the Parisian critics of the 1920s, such as Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein – among the ringleaders of the Impressionist film movement.^[5] Cinephilia, for these critics, not only implied a specific way of writing, but also a particular spectatorial posture, based on panoramic perception and attention for detail. In that same context, another Parisian collective demonstrated a strong fascination for the most modern of all art forms: the Surrealists, with André Breton, Louis Aragon and Man Ray reporting lyrically on the cinema’s revelatory capacities.^[6] All of these proto-cinephiles treated the cinema as a vehicle for revelation, although neither the information revealed nor the way in which this was done appeared to be verbally expressible. Epstein refused to reduce the untranslatable allure of the cinematic image, as he wrote: “The words are lacking. The words have not been found.”^[7]

Photogénie was the almost spiritual quality these writers attributed to singular details or elusive moments within a film, permitting the spectator to see anew. But while David Bordwell argues that “the concept of *photogénie* grew out of an attempt to account for the mysteriously alienating quality of cinema’s relation to reality”, Surrealists and Impressionists seemed to differ on the exact relation between, on the one hand, the camera’s automatism and, on the other hand, the director’s intentional transformation of the reality captured.^[8] Nevertheless, *photogénie* was always experienced in brief and elusive flares – hence the cinephiliac moment. According to Robert B. Ray, this responds to “the way movies are often experienced – as intermittent intensities (a face, a landscape, the fall of light across a room) that break free from the sometimes indifferent narratives that contain them.”^[9] Although classical cinema’s reliance on continuity editing aims to suppress this fundamental fragmentation, Ray argues that cinephiles have always treated the invisible style and linear narrative as “obstacles to overcome.”^[10]

Over the last decade, *photogénie* and the cinephiliac moment have regained critical and scholarly attention, as part of a cinephiliac turn within film studies. Initially this revival was prompted by Susan Sontag’s epitaph for cinephilia, first published in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1996.^[11] Over the last few years, however, academia’s fascination for cine-love reached a peak, with numerous publications examining historical manifestations of cinephilia, or redefining the notion for a digitalised and/or globalised context.^[12] By expanding upon a cinephiliac moment, I aim to add to yet another branch of cinephilia studies, one that adopts cinephilia as an alternative heuristic framework – thereby responding to the question Robert B. Ray, Christian Keathley and Rashna Wadia Richards have posed recently: now that we have identified what cinephilia was and is, where to go next?^[13] In response, these scholars have made various attempts to develop a critical methodology based on cinephile activities. I aim to take up their call and employ what Richards has labeled a “cinephiliac historiography”: a methodology that makes use of the idiosyncratic experience of the cinephiliac moment in order to produce new historical information.^[14] Adding to an intellectual continuum of cinephiles who have been intensely intrigued by ephemeral moments and peripheral details within films, this article will use Linda Darnell’s captivating look in *Fallen Angel* as an entry point for what Thomas Elsaesser has called counter-factual histories: “histories that would mine undeveloped or unconsidered points of entry into the cinema as object of study.”^[15]

Towards a Cinephiliac Historiography

In *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (2006), Keathley lays out a continuum of cinephiles that have reported extensively on their epiphanic encounters with cinematic moments or details. Keathley relates the particular posture that is required to experience a cinephiliac moment with other alternative spectatorial practices, such as Walter Benjamin’s *flânerie* and Roland Barthes’

punctum.^[16] Moreover, he refuses to merely interpret these moments, but instead suggests a productive treatment of them. Keathley proposes the “cinephiliac anecdote”, a critical methodology that attempts to derive historical insights from the encounter with a cinephiliac moment.^[17] Adding to the work of Ray, who originally approached cinephilia as an alternative method for researching cinema in *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (1995), Keathley provides a next step towards a cinephiliac heuristic framework. In *Cinematic Flashes: Cinephilia and Classical Hollywood* (2013), Richards explores this idea further, suggesting a cinephiliac historiography, heavily inspired by Walter Benjamin’s historical materialism.^[18] Her proposed methodology commences from the subjective encounter with a cinephiliac moment, which it then employs as a starting point for critical research, eventually generating objective knowledge on the revealing moment in particular, but also the production context that surrounds it. By doing so, it aspires to examine what the revelatory encounter with a cinephiliac moment might actually reveal. This method implies therefore not simply the reproduction, cataloguing or interpretation of cinephiliac moments, but the critical enlargement upon them. By treating cinephiliac moments as entry points for alternative histories, the cinephiliac historiography Richards proposes aims to use cinephilia as a tool for countering the canonical story of film, as her methodology “liberates the historian from constructing a singular, inclusive thesis.”^[19]

The fascination that numerous cultural theorists and intellectuals studying modernity have displayed for intriguing contingencies heavily inspires the practice of cinephiliac historiography. When encountering a cinephiliac moment, the spectator instinctively feels as if witnessing something that exceeds the linear narrative presented onscreen. This resembles Barthes’ appeal for the *punctum* in obviously staged scenes on photograph, such as the family portraits he analyses in *Camera Lucida* (1981): “It is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there.”^[20] Moreover, as Barthes wrote of the obtuse meaning he detected in an image from Sergei M. Eisenstein’s *Ivan Grozny* (SU, 1945), the fascination evoked by the experience of a cinephiliac moment “compels an interrogative reading.”^[21] Since cinephiles only intuitively recognise a cinephiliac moment upon encountering it, Keathley proposes to follow Stanley Cavell’s instruction to explore our intuition unsystematically, “to the point of tuition – to the point where our intuition teaches us something.”^[22] Ray suggests a method that is based on what American theorist Gregory L. Ulmer calls heuristics, “the branch of logic that treats the art of discovery or invention.”^[23] According to Ray, a heuristic film studies commences “where *photogénie*, third meanings, and fetishism intersect: with the cinematic detail whose insistent appeal eludes precise explanation.”^[24] He furthermore relates this to doing “research in the form of a spectacle”, a phrase he borrows from Jean-Luc Godard, who, in an interview in 1962, claimed: “Cinema, Truffaut said, is spectacle – Méliès – and research – Lumière. If I analyse myself today, I see I have always wanted, basically, to do research in the form of a spectacle.”^[25] Ray’s resulting method resembles the Surrealists’ irrational enlargement, the deriving of chains of associations from a given object: “Select a detail from a movie, one that interests you without your knowing why. Follow this detail wherever it leads you and report your findings.”^[26] For Richards, Walter Benjamin’s writings on modernity offer the most fundamental inspiration for developing the outlines of a cinephiliac historiography. His uncompleted *Arcades Project* sought to uncover alternative histories as well, those of 19th century Parisian city life.^[27] Since modernity, with its unstructured nature and evanescent events, generated a fragmentation, rather than a continuity of experience, Benjamin argued that our methods for approaching history would need to change too. His materialist historiography breaks with the conventional model of history as continuous progress, and accesses the past via fleeting moments and apparently ordinary details. For Benjamin, they became the clues that could potentially unlock the alternative discourses of modern history. Richards’ cinephiliac historiography departs as well from curious objects, fleeting gestures or uncanny moments, as they comprise the entry points for unanticipated chains of historical events.

More often than not the counter-factual stories that these researchers seek to unveil figure in a context that has been recognised as the most linear, the most rationally structured in the history of film. As Ray and Richards have demonstrated, Classical Hollywood’s Golden Age provides a suitable context for the application of the cinephiliac historiography.^[28] Hollywood’s studio era has long been defined in terms of André Bazin’s influential idiom “the genius of the system.”^[29] However, many

have failed to recognise the deliberately hyperbolic tone of Bazin's statement, which meant to counter his disciples' blunt declarations on the auteur-filmmaker existing solely by virtue of his creative rejection of studio interference. Moreover, many of the grand narratives on Hollywood's studio system and its standardised operating procedures that have derived from Bazin's idea overlooked that he, in that very same passage, admitted that "freedom is greater in Hollywood than it is said to be, as long as one knows how to detect its *manifestations*."^[30] By means of these manifestations, Bazin seemed to suggest that alternative practices (and there were more than just the individual expression of the auteur) were always defining the shape of the studio system's products. Cinephiliac historiography intends to reveal these practices, in order to uncover the contingent nature of filmmaking in the studio era.

If Looks Could Kill

My fascination for Darnell's brief glance of echoes Jacques Rivette's *Cahiers du cinéma* essay on Otto Preminger's *Angel Face* (1952).^[31] His attempts to articulate the virtues of Preminger's characteristic directorial approach read as cinephiliac moments, as Rivette's ecstatic descriptions clearly focus on elements that exceed the fictional world of the film. When watching *Angel Face*, Rivette noticed that "an interest outside that of the plot continually rivets our attention on the gestures of characters whose images at the same time prove to us the lack of any real depth."^[32] Operating in *Cahiers'* auteurist framework, Rivette attributed fleeting moments, such as "Jean Simmons's uncertain footfall, her huddled figure in the armchair" to Preminger's neutral style, as the director did "exploit to its limit the cinema's ability to capture the fortuitous (but a fortuity that is willed), to record the accidental (but the accidental that is created) through the closeness and sharpness of the look."^[33] In the same auteurist tradition, Andrew Sarris employed Preminger's films in order to shed light on the spectatorial dimension of *mise-en-scène*. Despite his auteurist vision, Sarris acknowledged that Preminger's *mise-en-scène* typified "the gap between the intention of the director and his effect upon the spectator."^[34] He moreover recognised the fragmentary character of this effect: "It is during these moments that one feels the magical powers of *mise-en-scène* to get more out of a picture than is put in by a director."^[35]

Balancing, like the Surrealists and the Impressionists, between the camera's ability to record the fortuitous automatically on the one hand, and the director's neutral yet intentional transformation of the captured reality on the other hand, Rivette and Sarris aptly articulate the effect of Darnell's glance on me. This effect could be described as an instance of doubling: I simultaneously receive an iconic representation of the character Stella and the indexical image of the actress Darnell. Willemsen argued that the cinephiliac moment is usually something in excess of the representation, "when cinema, in showing you one thing, allows you to glimpse something else that you are not meant to see."^[36] For me, this particular glance exceeds Stella's contemptuous reaction to Eric's poor pick-up lines, revealing a glimpse of Darnell's own personality. Could it, for instance, be that this glance off-screen was directed towards her notoriously tyrannical director, who amusedly observed how Darnell had to hint at Stella's alcoholism? These allusions did echo Darnell's personal anxieties, as she struggled with a severe alcohol addiction herself while shooting *Fallen Angel*. Her first husband, cinematographer Peverell Marley, who she met on the set of *Hotel for Women* (Gregory Ratoff, 1939), was a heavy drinker himself, and he reportedly introduced her to alcohol in 1944. According to Darnell's biographer Ronald L. Davis, "Pev encouraged her to match him drink for drink", resulting in an addiction that would haunt her for the rest of her life, eventually causing her professional downfall.^[37] Moreover, the parental inheritance Eric is referring to might have been hard to cope with. Darnell was raised in a house of domestic turmoil: her possessive mother Pearl – "no stranger to the bottle herself" – forced her to chase her own unfulfilled dreams in the entertainment industry, while her father, a Dallas farm boy turned postal clerk, was subdued by his incessantly suspicious, "sexually frustrated" wife.^[38]

Preminger, who was dubbed 'Otto the Terrible' for his infamous outbursts on set, clashed repeatedly with Darnell. In the 1940s, Preminger was a studio director at Twentieth Century Fox, which was headed by president Spyros Skouras, with Darryl F. Zanuck as Vice President in Charge of

Production. Zanuck gained reputation in the 1930s as the authoritarian head of production at Warner Brothers, and later as the co-founder (with Joseph M. Schenk) of 20th Century Pictures, Inc. (which became Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation when Zanuck and Schenk bought the Fox studios in 1935). As George F. Custen writes: “In the central producer system under which Zanuck worked, all authority led to him and all power radiated from him.”^[39] Tino Balio mentions that, at Fox, Zanuck became legendary for his interfering approach: “while watching rushes he gave comments to the director, dictated notes to the editor, and chose the takes he wanted for the picture.”^[40] Throughout the 1940s, Preminger and Zanuck, in many ways each other’s antipodes, clashed habitually, not least during the production of *Fallen Angel*, a film that marks Preminger’s first unpleasant encounter with the commercial operating procedures of the studio system. In 1944, Preminger had directed his breakthrough film *Laura*. Initially he was only appointed to produce the film, after Zanuck, following a shouting match on the set of *Kidnapped* (Alfred L. Werker, 1938), had sworn that Preminger, as long as he was at Fox, would never direct a film at the studio again.^[41] However, after a series of conflicts with Rouben Mamoulian, who was originally set to direct *Laura*, Preminger managed to convince Zanuck that the production would benefit from his directorial approach.

Laura became a box office hit, but at the same time it burdened Preminger with an inconvenient legacy, as the studio would now incessantly urge him to reuse the formula that had made *Laura* successful. In his autobiography, Preminger expressed his frustration with this commercial procedure, writing that “freedom of choice was in rather short supply at Twentieth Century Fox under Darryl Zanuck. I was turning out a string of films following rules and obeying orders not unlike a foreman in a sausage factory.”^[42] The potential parallels with *Laura* were Zanuck’s main motivation to give the green light for the production of *Fallen Angel*, again a whodunit built around the enigmatic murder of a young woman, with a set of fanatical lovers as possible suspects. As Chris Fujiwara explains, “in Zanuck’s mind, *Fallen Angel* was taking shape as a follow-up to Preminger’s previous success.”^[43] In order to repeat the triumph of *Laura*, he teamed Preminger up again with largely the same crew he worked with for *Laura*: composer David Raksin, director of photography Joseph LaSelle, art directors Lyle Wheeler and Leland Fuller, set decorator Thomas Little, sound editor Harry Leonard, costume designer Bonnie Cashin and male lead Dana Andrews. The most important change in personnel concerned the role of the murdered woman, which was played by Gene Tierney in *Laura*. This time, it went to Linda Darnell, who, despite various fruitless attempts to seduce her, was still one of Zanuck’s protégés.^[44] Time and again, Zanuck instructed Preminger to not only echo the elements that had made *Laura* a hit, but also to provide Darnell with enough screen time to shine. This evidently frustrated Preminger, as he saw Darnell as exemplary of Zanuck’s meddling working methods. His retaliation was to give Darnell an unreasonably hard time during the shooting, a phase in the production process when, as Balio mentions, Zanuck would usually “back off”, so his directors could work in relative freedom.^[45]

As the palm reading dialogue suggests, *Fallen Angel* contains various references to Darnell’s troubled private life, most notably her alcohol addiction and dysfunctional family. When, for instance, Eric assures Stella that she belongs in the Stork Club, promising her a ticket to stardom through the publicity mill he runs, Pearl Darnell’s zealous attempts to launch Linda’s career in the entertainment industry are recalled.^[46] Her sister Undeen later remembered Darnell’s unpleasant experiences while working with Preminger: “Tweedles was not one to dislike many people, but Preminger she couldn’t tolerate. He was a good director, but a mean son of a bitch. She hated him.”^[47] Despite Preminger’s resistance, Zanuck, however, managed to move Darnell to the centre of attention. Watching the rushes, Zanuck, infamous for controlling his studio films through editing, commanded Preminger and editor Harry Reynolds to diminish the screen time of Alice Faye, who played Eric’s other love interest June, in order to put greater focus on Darnell.^[48] When Faye saw the rough cut of the film, she was furious and vowed never to work for the studio again. The subsequent conflict with her former mentor Zanuck did indeed practically end her career, as she would not make a single film until *State Fair* (José Ferrer, US) in 1962. Faye did, however, find an ally in Preminger, who had courted her to play the part; she effortlessly fit the part of the characteristically righteous but vulnerable Preminger heroine (a role in which Gene Tierney sparkled so often), defined by Fujiwara as “a person committed

to a ruse, which she carries out with defiance, pride, and uncertainty.”[\[49\]](#) Although Faye later declared that “Preminger was very tough to work for”, she also admitted: “He got a lot out of me, though; I was proud of the performance I turned in.”[\[50\]](#)

Four years and two more troublesome collaborations with Preminger – *Centennial Summer* (1946) and *Forever Amber* (1947) – later, Darnell starred in her most critically acclaimed role: Joseph L. Mankiewicz’ *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949). While filming a crucial scene, Mankiewicz, with whom Darnell would develop a tumultuous extramarital affair, contrived a legendary strategy for eliciting her most resentful look.[\[51\]](#) Darnell’s character Lora Mae is supposed to react with a bitter expression on encountering a photograph of Addie Ross on the piano in the house of her wealthy employer, Porter Hollingsway (Paul Douglas), whom she aims to marry. Addie Ross is the author of the letter referred to in the title of the film, in which she informs Lora Mae and two of her friends that she has left town with the husband of one of them. When Lora Mae looks at the photograph, we only see the picture frame from behind, which allowed Mankiewicz to replace it with a picture of Preminger in a Nazi uniform, in order to evoke Darnell’s most disdainful look.[\[52\]](#) It would be the exact same look as the one she had adopted when briefly glancing away from Eric in the palm reading scene from *Fallen Angel*.

Cinematic Hieroglyphs

This counter-factual history sheds a new light upon yet another peculiar moment in *Fallen Angel*. When June and Eric spend the night together in a San Francisco hotel, on the run from detective Mark Judd (Charles Bickford) who tries to pin the murder of Stella on Eric, a remarkable series of events take place. After the newlyweds have quarreled about June’s inheritance money and Eric’s devious intentions with it, June tells him for the first time that she does not care about the money and loves him, whereupon they embrace. An elliptical dissolve follows, resulting in a shot of Eric sitting in the hotel room window, unveiling aspects of his shady past. Preminger frames him from the knees up, in a composition that is dominated by a part of the hotel’s marquee: *OTE*. As he walks towards the bed, Eric regretfully concludes that everything he ever strived for, even his attempts to seduce Stella, are “all gone, up in smoke”, and falls asleep. June then removes the smouldering cigarette from his hand, walks from the bed to the window, opens it, muses for a second, and then leaves the frame on the right. Instead of following her, Preminger holds the dense composition, which echoes the frame that opened the scene. Again the marquee is stressed, but since the camera is positioned further back and the angle is slightly lower, another letter combination becomes visible: *HOT*. Before using the marquee for a second elliptical dissolve, Preminger holds the composition just long enough for us to assume that there is more at stake here, after which the camera pans to Eric and June, waking up next to each other.

In his book *Film Hieroglyphs* (1991), Tom Conley discusses the potential functions of text within the cinematic composition. The intrusion of text in the frame, he argues, can lead to “secret readings of film, whose value resides in their evanescence.”[\[53\]](#) The alternative insights these ephemeral texts generate parallel the counter-factual histories a cinephiliac historiography aims to reveal:

The image connotes timeless abstraction in its pictorial form, while the literal shape of writing, when inserted into the field of the image, denies any stable presence of meaning. The shape of its lines enhances the image, but its meanings distort it. The film may indeed ‘write’ a story of images, but its traces of script change the narrative that is engaged.[\[54\]](#)

A pragmatic interpretation of these letters evokes Preminger’s numerous disputes with the censors. The judicial battles following his controversial films from the 1950s, such as *The Moon is Blue* (1953), *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955), and *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) have been widely documented upon. But, even as a studio director at Twentieth Century Fox, Preminger often quarreled with the Production Code Administration and the National Legion of Decency. Censor Joseph Breen had previously moulded some of the characters in *Laura* so that they would fit his ideals; also during the production of *Fallen Angel*, the Breen Office repeatedly interfered. According to Fujiwara, “Breen advised that June and Eric should not be shown in bed together in their hotel room, because the

British censor board would delete the scene, but the released film shows the couple lying side by side in bed.”[\[55\]](#) Not only does Preminger show them in bed together in the morning, with the elliptical dissolve focusing for a remarkably long moment on the marquee letters (*HOT*), he also unambiguously suggests precisely what Breen had wanted to avoid.

A second secret reading of the marquee is more complex. The letter combination *HOT* evidently prompts the association with fire, which played a more than crucial role in the lives and careers of female leads Faye and Darnell. Faye would probably never have made it to the cast of *Fallen Angel* had she not given her career a new boost with a much-acclaimed part in Henry King’s disaster drama *In Old Chicago* (1937). With this film, a fictionalised account of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, and one of Twentieth Century Fox’s biggest productions up to that point, Zanuck wanted to reprise the success of MGM’s *San Francisco* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1936), a musical set against the backdrop of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and its resulting fires (a series of events referred to by professor Madley’s assistant Ellis in *Fallen Angel*, when he tells Eric to join them to San Francisco, in order to “hit them like the earthquake”). Originally Zanuck had loaned Jean Harlow from Louis B. Mayer’s MGM for playing the part of Belle Fawcett but, after her premature death, Faye took over the female lead. Faye’s early screen image had been modeled on Harlow, but when Zanuck noticed her potential, he transformed her from a wisecracking chorus girl into the tender and motherly character she would play in several Shirley Temple vehicles.[\[56\]](#) *In Old Chicago* offered Faye the opportunity to abandon this type and move on to more mature roles. The shooting of the climactic fire scene threatened to be a quite dangerous operation. According to biographer Jane Lenz Elder, “studio crews built a special tank of water adjacent to the set where the fire scenes were shot, and as an extra precaution King prohibited women cast members, including Alice, from the filming of the fire, instead using stunt men in dresses.”[\[57\]](#) *In Old Chicago* became a big hit and Faye’s performance opposite Tyrone Power and Don Ameche is still regarded as her best – not in the least because of “King’s care in developing Alice’s confidence.”[\[58\]](#)

Darnell had less pleasant experiences with precarious shoots involving fires. Throughout the 1940s she gathered a reputation as the Hollywood actress with the most onscreen deaths. She got shot in *Buffalo Bill* (William A. Wellman, 1944) and *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946), stabbed in *Summer Storm* (Douglas Sirk, 1944), strangled in *Hangover Square* (John Brahm, 1945), beaten to death in *Fallen Angel* and burned at the stake in *Anna and the King of Siam* (John Cromwell, 1946). On top of that, Darnell had to perform a staged suicide attempt in *It Happened Tomorrow* (René Clair, 1944), was murdered in a vision of her jealous husband (played by Rex Harrison) in *Unfaithfully Yours* (Preston Sturges, 1948), and was cast, uncredited, as the Virgin Mary who appears before Bernadette Soubirous in *The Song of Bernadette* (Henry King, 1943). For the burning-at-the-stake scene in *Anna and the King of Siam*, director John Cromwell insisted upon using a real fire, resulting in Darnell severely burning her hands. According to Davis: “Ironically, Linda had a deep fear of fire dating back to childhood and harbored the premonition that she would die by burning. (...) ‘Next time,’ she confessed, ‘I prefer being shot or stabbed. At least that kind of dying is painless’.”[\[59\]](#)

Remarkably enough, Cromwell was not the only director who, deliberately or not, alluded to Darnell’s pyrophobic premonitions. In *Buffalo Bill*, the Cheyenne set numerous settlements in the countryside ablaze; in *Brigham Young* (Henry Hathaway, 1940) the house of the Illinois Mormon family her character resides with is burned down; and in *Two Flags West* (Robert Wise, 1950), the Confederate Army camp she stays in is torched by Kiowa warriors. In *Summer Storm* she plays Olga, a woodcutter’s daughter who is convinced that one day lightning will kill her, just as it did with her mother. In *Hangover Square*, a film that begins and ends with massive fires, Darnell’s character is strangled to death by serial killer Harvey Bone (Laird Cregar), who then throws her body on the bonfire during Guy Fawkes Night. In *Unfaithfully Yours*, her husband, a world-famous symphony conductor, accidentally sets his room on fire when igniting a detective’s file on his allegedly adulterous wife. Finally, there is a brief moment in a scene from *It Happened Tomorrow* where the intrusion of text destabilises the linear story. The scene plays in the dressing room of Cigolini (Jack Oakie), an illusionist of whom Darnell plays the sidekick and niece. Throughout the scene, Cigolini

repeatedly threatens her with a gun, while his movements reveal two remarkable signs. A first one is located next to the door, and says *TURN OFF THE GAS*, while a candle burns next to it. A second one is unveiled when she opens the door of the dressing room. It mentions *NO SMOKING*, although the shot includes a pipe-smoking employee right beneath it. Both are potential entry points for what Conley labeled “secret readings”, once more related to Darnell’s macabre premonition.^[60]

Darnell’s ordeals on set would worsen even further. Two years after *Fallen Angel*, Zanuck teamed her up a third time with Preminger, this time for the title role in *Forever Amber*, a period piece set in the English Civil War of the 1640s. When filming one of his characteristic but highly complex mobile long takes amidst the Great Fire of London, Preminger refused to hire stunt men (as Henry King had done in order to guarantee Faye’s safety when filming *In Old Chicago*), instead ruthlessly ordering Darnell to perform the dangerous fire scenes herself. Once again she got burnt, and the shooting of the long take almost ended fatally. As cinematographer Leon Shamroy recalled: “During the Great Fire, a roof caved in. I pulled the camera back, and she just got out in time. She was terrified of fire, almost as though she had a premonition.”^[61] A decade later, Preminger’s reckless treatment of his actresses again nearly led to a catastrophe. When filming *Saint Joan* (1957), he placed the debuting Jean Seberg on a pyre for the burning-at-the-stake scene – a setting that echoed Darnell’s death scenes in *Hangover Square* and *Anna and the King of Siam*. Two hidden gas canisters exploded, surrounding her with a rush of flames, whereupon her costume caught fire. Studio firemen extinguished the flames just in time, without Seberg suffering any significant harm. Preminger was momentarily traumatised as well, but he recovered in time to make sure the accident had been caught on film. According to Foster Hirsch, the director was even “accused (...) of having arranged the mishap as a publicity gimmick” and, despite the evident absurdity of this allegation, “he certainly didn’t block newspapers and magazines from reporting the incident.”^[62]

Putting actresses through frightening ordeals, without any regard for their personal traumas, often seemed to be part and parcel of an acting career during Hollywood’s Golden Age. The story of Gene Tierney offers a striking example. In 1943 Tierney and her husband, fashion designer Oleg Cassini, were expecting their first child. In the third month of her pregnancy, Tierney contracted rubella when she made an appearance at the Hollywood Canteen. She later learned that she likely contracted the illness from a female fan, who had broken quarantine in order to see Tierney perform. As a consequence, their daughter Daria was born prematurely, with the rubella causing her to be deaf, blind and mentally retarded. Tierney subsequently suffered a severe depression, of which she would never entirely recover.^[63] In the following years, the directors with whom she worked let the unfortunate actress perform scenes that sometimes uncannily paralleled her personal tragedies. In *Laura*, the first film she appeared in after the troubles birth of her daughter, she plays a woman that rises from the grave. In *Leave Her to Heaven* (John M. Stahl, 1945), her tormented character mercilessly watches how her disabled brother-in-law drowns, and eventually deliberately throws herself down the stairs in order to cause a miscarriage. In the most poignant scene of Mankiewicz’s *Dragonwyck* (1946), her newborn dies in her arms. In *The Razor’s Edge* (Edmund Goulding, 1946), she plays Isabel Bradley, whose close friend Sophie (Anne Baxter) loses her husband and daughter in a car accident, after which she becomes an alcoholic. In *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (Mankiewicz, 1947), she falls in love with the ghost of a drowned captain, and in *Whirlpool* (Preminger, 1949), she plays the emotionally unstable wife of a psychoanalyst.

That Tierney, following the success of her most acclaimed role in *Laura*, would very often play variations on that vulnerable character was a direct result of the studios’ effective fabrication of stars. As Basinger explains, the last step of the classic starlet build-up was the search for “a type that he or she could play over and over. And over. That would keep the movies rolling and the money flowing in. The star had to become ‘bankable’, which meant the star had to become a recognizable shelf product.”^[64] Furthermore, the remarkable similarities between Tierney’s personal life and the characters she played from Laura Hunt onwards are not coincidentally part of an era that witnessed the major studios’ increasing reliance on acting coaches. Very often, these coaches were employing the Stanislavsky system, of which particularly the concept of emotional memory would heavily

influence Method techniques. In the 1930s and 1940s, actors were often encouraged to make scenes alive in memory while studying the script. Cynthia Baron explains that Jessica Tandy applied this technique by “first reading and rereading the script, then looking for points of contact with her own experience she could draw on, then developing a background for the character.”^[65] When actually playing, actors were not supposed to relive the part, but rather rely on the memories they invented in preparation: “Because they were ‘synthetic memories’, invented by actors during their study of the script, they could be activated by opening one’s ‘mental notebook’, and let go of immediately after the scene or take was over.”^[66] However, as Tandy’s technique reveals, one’s mental notebook could, next to merely synthetic memories, also contain traces from real life experiences (such as, for instance, pyrophobia, alcoholism or the loss of a child). In general, Hollywood’s star machine was indeed epitomised by a thin border between real people, their public life and the characters they played. Basinger argues that, already in the 1910s, “the business learned that audiences responded to actors on film as if they were the characters they were playing, and that what moviegoers saw as a strange amalgam of the real person, the character he played, and the interaction between the two.”^[67] The fusion of reality and fiction was thus often an unavoidable side effect of stardom in the studio era. In some cases, however, this blurred line carried a sinister undertone.

Epilogue: It Happened Tomorrow

Darnell’s career rapidly fell into decline in the 1950s. She became a freelance actress, made a number of films in Europe, and eventually relapsed into insignificant television and stage work. At the age of 41, her career was over, just like her three, unhappy marriages. In April 1965, she decided to spend the Easter holidays at the house of her friends Jeanne and Richard Curtis in Glenview, Illinois. On the evening of April 8, Linda, Jeanne and her daughter Patty were watching television, and noticed that *Star Dust* (Walter Lang, 1940), the film that had launched Darnell’s career at Fox, was scheduled. *Star Dust* contains a metafictional narrative that echoes Darnell’s first career steps in Hollywood, even featuring a character (played by William Gargan) who parodies Darryl Zanuck. It was during the shooting of this film that Darnell met cinematographer Peverell Marley, who would become her first husband and father of her only child, but would also introduce her to alcohol. While watching the film, Darnell was overwhelmed by a bittersweet nostalgia, and decided to ask her former employer for a copy: “I’ll call Darryl Zanuck tomorrow. The son of a bitch owes me something for those thirteen years.”^[68] But tomorrow never came. At night, the house caught fire. Everybody could be saved in time, except for Darnell, who was overwhelmed when the roof caved in. She died from burning. Although sensational reports stated that Darnell was intoxicated and therefore caused the fire herself, the presumed cause was a smouldering cigarette someone had forgotten to put out before going to sleep.

Notes

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^[4] Willemen and King, 234.

^[5] Willemen and King, 231-233.

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^[8] David Bordwell, *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory and Film Style* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 106.

^[9] Robert B. Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 4.

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- [17] Keathley, 133.
- [18] Richards, 4.
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- [20] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981), 55.
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- [26] Ray, 13.
- [27] See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
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- [60] Conley, viii.
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