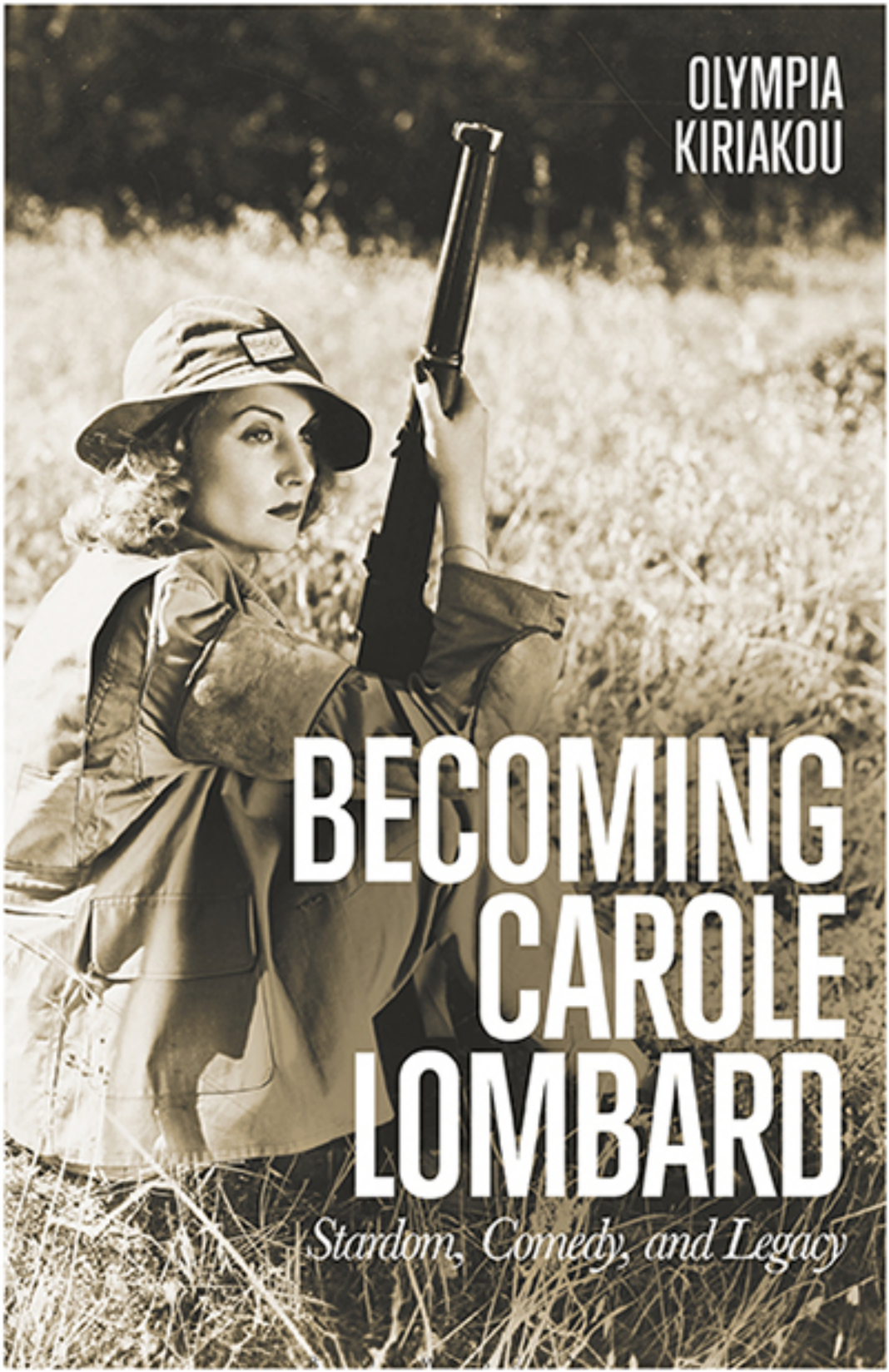
OLYMPIA
KIRIAKOU
BECOMING
CAROLE
LOMBARD
Stardom, Comedy, and Legacy

Becoming Carole Lombard

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Stardom, Comedy, and Legacy

Olympia Kiriakou

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Introduction

Carole Lombard, the screwball girl?

> *She gets up too early, plays tennis too hard, wastes time and feeling on trifles and drinks Coca-Colas the way Samuel Johnson used to drink tea. She is a scribbler on telephone pads, inhibited nail-nibbler, toe-scuffler, pillow-grabber, head-and-elbow scratcher and chain cigarette smoker. When Carole Lombard talks, her conversation, often brilliant, is punctuated by screeches, laughs, growls, gesticulations and the expletive of a sailor'parrot.*[1]

Noel F. Busch's observation in the October 17, 1938 issue of *Life* magazine encapsulates the prevailing conception of Carole Lombard's star persona and her relationship with screwball comedy. Over the past eighty years, similar observations have contextualized Lombard's star and screen personas in relation to the screwball genre. There has been limited engagement with Lombard's non-screwball films, signaling both an incomplete discourse about Lombard's screwball connections and a misunderstanding of Lombard's stardom, film performances, and career as a whole. While Lombard did achieve her greatest success in screwball comedy, she also worked extensively in other genres and had a star persona that evolved significantly in name,[2] image and style. Lombard was more than just a screwball comedian: she was also a performer in varying genres, a popular media figure whose personal

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[1]Noel F. Busch, "A Loud Cheer for The Screwball Girl," *Life*, October 17, 1938, 48–50.
[2]Lombard was born Jane Alice Peters, and in the early 1930s briefly went by 'Carol' Lombard.

and professional life developed in phases within the Hollywood studio system, one half of two different star couples,[3] and a public personality who intervened in the cultural and political landscape of the 1930s and 1940s.

Busch's quotation is a productive starting point since it is one of the most frequently cited observations about Lombard. It has been widely disseminated in retrospective assessments of Lombard,[4] likely because it summarizes the ineffable qualities attributed to her star persona that are tough to pinpoint in writing. He invokes aural and kinetic imagery in his description, paralleling Lombard's energetic, physically active and modern screwball heroines like Lily Garland from *Twentieth Century* (Howard Hawks, 1934), Irene Bullock from *My Man Godfrey* (Gregory LaCava, 1936), and Hazel Flagg from *Nothing Sacred* (William Wellman, 1937). His words all but bring Lombard to life, a sign of just how integral sound and physicality are to her screwball persona, and to screwball comedy more generally.[5]

Later in his article, Busch offers insight into the social impact of Lombard's zany screwball star persona. Gesturing to the United States's tempestuous political and economic climate in the late 1930s, he claims that she represents "a quality that is currently more precious to the U.S. public … utter undependability."[6] Lombard embodied the dynamic, vigorous, and impulsive prewar innocence of screwball comedy. Yet at the same time, her impish personality offered American audiences a distraction from the country's uncertain future; her screen persona brought them into fantastic worlds where the economic bleakness of the Depression was shrouded by humor and happy endings. Off screen, Lombard personified 1930s progressive American femininity. Throughout the decade she was a vocal supporter of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal economic reform programs, and was also a visible figure in contemporaneous sociopolitical debates about women's rights in the workplace, increased representation of women in politics,[7] and financial independence as a

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[3]She was first married to William Powell (1931–1933), then to Clark Gable (1939–1942).

[4]For example, see: "Carole Lombard," *Dear Mr. Gable*, accessed November 17, 2015, http://dearmrgable.com/?page_id=3216; Robert Matzen, *Carole Lombard: A bio-bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1988), 26; Wes D. Gehring, *Carole Lombard: The Hoosier Tornado* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2003), 173.

[5]Jane M. Greene, "A Proper Dash of Spice: Screwball Comedy and the Production Code," *Journal of Film and Video* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 48. See also: Alex Clayton, *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007), 138; Tina Olsin Lent, "Romantic Love and Friendship: "The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995), 328.

[6]Busch, 48.

[7]Ronald Colman, Cary Grant, Carole Lombard, Groucho Marx, Lawrence Tibbett, "The Circle," NBC-Red, Hollywood, CA: January 22, 1939.

solution to gender inequality.[8] Although her star persona itself was often framed by patriarchal discourse, particularly during her marriages to Hollywood stars William Powell and Clark Gable, Lombard nonetheless transcended the gender boundaries of the 1930s through her headstrong and independent nature, and her progressive politics should be viewed within the context of the volatile domestic and international economic, social, and political climate.[9]

Busch's quotation is but one of several dozen interpretations of Carole Lombard's stardom, and he frames her star image as an extension of her on-screen persona as if the two were one and the same. The image he paints of Lombard was a common one found in contemporaneous popular media. Consider a sampling of similar descriptions from fan magazine articles written between 1937 and 1939, the years in which Lombard was at the height of her screwball fame:

She's harum-scarum, she dances in the park at 3 a.m., she dotes on practical jokes, she hates pink, and she's so impulsive she almost lives behind the eight-ball.[10]

> Candid! Why it's the very stuff she's made of. Painfully frank all her life, conscientiously brutal, especially where she herself is concerned …[11]

> Screwy? Insane? Balmy? — Okay, then, make the most of it. I simply can't help it. I'm going to tell you about Carole Lombard's home life, and that's all there is to it. You can take it or leave it. All I've got to say is this—when it comes to the business of getting the most downright, sheer fun out of this usually drab business of living, then I hand all prizes unreservedly to Carole Lombard.[12]

> Carole stares life smack in the face and laughs … We walked over to her bungalow, Carole and I. At least, I walked. Carole got there by executing a few spirals and curves and a leap upon her scooter-bike which stands in front of her bungalow handy for her excursions around the lot … She is "almost forever" laughing, is Carole. She is like something wound up at high tension. But as high tension is her natural métier it is natural.[13]

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[8]George Madden, "Hollywood is Ruled by Women," *Movie Mirror*, 1934, 46–47.

[9]For example, in her "If Women Ruled" segment from NBC's short-lived program *The Circle*, Lombard encouraged the idea of women entering in national and international politics, and argued they would be more reasonable, non-combative, and level-headed than the male leaders of the Allied war effort. Please see: Ronald Colman, Cary Grant, Carole Lombard, Groucho Marx, Lawrence Tibbett, "The Circle," NBC-Red, Hollywood, CA: January 22, 1939.

[10]Marian Rhea, "Lombard Unlimited," *Radio Mirror,* April 1939, 18.

[11]Katharine Hartley, "What's Become of the Good Scout?" *Modern Screen* (August 1938), 86.

[12]Harry Lang, "The Utterly Balmy Home Life of Carole Lombard," *Motion Picture* (February 1937), 36.

[13]Gladys Hall, "Lombard – As She Sees Herself," *Motion Picture* (November 1938), 35.

Though varied in approach, these quotations mirror Busch's assessment of Lombard's star persona, and the magazine articles from which these statements originate draw symbiotic connections between her "reel" and "real" identities. It is not my intention to assess whether she was as "screwy" as these columnists deemed her to be; I have no way of knowing Lombard's "authentic" self, nor does that line of inquiry get to the heart of understanding "Carole Lombard" as a constructed star image. Rather, I am interested in the way these observations have been amalgamated to form her public identity, and the construction of her star persona rather than the "truth" of said discourse.

In death, popular media sources have uniformly stressed the significance of screwball comedy to Lombard's star persona. Consider the major posthumously released biographies: Larry Swindell's *Screwball: The Life Story of Carole Lombard* (1975), Wes Gehring's *Carole Lombard: The Hoosier Tornado* (2003), Robert Matzen's *Fireball: Carole Lombard and the Mystery of Flight 3* (2014), and Michelle Morgan's *Carole Lombard: Twentieth-Century Star* (2016). Although each writer adopts diverging methodologies and addresses Lombard in different contexts,[14] all of the titles use words or phrases that place an emphasis on the screwball qualities of Lombard's star persona.[15] Likewise, the biopic *Gable and Lombard* (Sidney J. Furie, 1976) goes to great lengths to validate Lombard's screwball reputation. Besides the film's historical and chronological inaccuracies, *Gable and Lombard* offers a one-dimensional portrayal of Lombard that is based primarily upon her screwball image. Her character—played by Jill Clayburgh—comes across as wildly unstable, an impression made clear by the film's opening scene when she arrives at a posh Hollywood party in an ambulance wearing a hospital gown. Lombard did, allegedly, arrive at the party in this fashion[16] but without the proper historical context—the so-called "Nervous Breakdown Party" was given by Jock Whitney on February 7, 1936 in honor of screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart's wife having just been released from a sanitarium[17]—her bizarre entrance makes no sense other than to confirm her "authentic" screwball proclivities.

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[14]Morgan's book is a popular biography, and focuses heavily on Lombard's childhood, private life, and her relationships with husbands William Powell and Clark Gable. By contrast, Gehring's book was published by the Indiana Historical Society Press, and emphasizes Lombard's "Hoosier" origins. Finally, Matzen's book includes biographical information but mainly offers a meticulously detailed chronological account of the events leading up to and immediately following the January 16, 1942 crash of TWA flight 3.

[15]Michelle Morgan's subtitle "Twentieth-Century Star" primarily alludes to Lombard's modernity, however it could also be interpreted as a reference to the actress's first screwball comedy, *Twentieth Century* (Howard Hawks, 1934).

[16]Gehring, 131.

[17]Leo Townsend, "Good News," *Modern Screen*, March 1936, 13. See also: Matzen, 96.

Rethinking Lombard's stardom

The book's title, *Becoming Carole Lombard: Stardom, Comedy, and Legacy*, gestures to the cultural, industrial, and ideological factors involved in building Lombard's star persona. My aim is to challenge the prevailing discourse about Carole Lombard as a star restricted to the realm of screwball comedy, but I also hope to demonstrate how she is a productive case study to probe other topics in film studies. Understanding the dimensions of Lombard's star persona speaks to the mutually constitutive relationship between a star and their screen image. Of this phenomenon, Barry King writes, "the persona is in itself a character, but one that transcends placement or containment in a particular narrative and exists in cinematic rather than filmic time and space."[18] Stars exist in "cinematic" rather than "filmic" time and space, which suggests that the star's image both arises from and preempts their individual performances. The changing status of Lombard's stardom from the mid1930s to today exposes the potentially negative consequences of such a tight relationship between star, character, and genre, because her work in screwball comedy has eclipsed any variances in her career and public image. The star-character symbiosis that is central to discussions about Hollywood stardom is useful in analyses of Lombard's screwball films, but it also has the adverse effect of making her stardom appear one-dimensional.

Paul McDonald argues that single-stars [had] "dual capacity as labour and capital," and stars like Lombard were identities manufactured by the Hollywood studios and publicity outlets. But they also became a "form of capital inasmuch as his or her own image can be used to create advantage in the market for films and secure profits."[19] Lombard's stardom is not unusual in the sense that her image was also constructed, and throughout this book I outline the immense and often highly publicized efforts that went into transforming Jane Alice Peters into Carole Lombard. From 1921 to 1942—the year of her first film and the year of her death, respectively—Lombard's stardom took on many forms: from a slapstick player to a glamour girl, then to a screwball comedienne and in the last years of her life, before her untimely death, to a contented housewife—or at least someone happy to present this image. The sheer fact that her persona underwent such drastic changes in just over two decades confirms the ephemerality of her screwball identity.

Finally, while I argue that Carole Lombard is more than just a screwball comedienne, it is also important to acknowledge the impact her stardom has had on subsequent female comedians, the continued influence screwball

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[18]Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," in *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, ed. Jeremy Butler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 147.

[19]Paul McDonald, *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2000), 13.

comedy plays on Lombard's star persona, and the legacy of her stardom more broadly. This book therefore explores the mystery of stardom and legacy more generally, and uses Lombard as a case study to probe the question of why some stars remain popular while others do not.

The single-star method and textual analysis

Despite Carole Lombard's immense success, box-office bankability, and impact on the progressive feminist politics of the 1930s and early 1940s, historical and theoretical works about her are sparse.[20] As the first book-length study about Lombard, my research will trace the evolution of her star persona and film performances as they intersect with the industrial and cultural politics of the classical Hollywood period. While some may fear that single-star studies can be limited in their scope, Lisa Downing and Sue Harris note that, in fact, this approach "allows for a careful analysis of the way in which a given star text signifies in a number of contexts."[21] Such a rationale makes sense: stars do not simply exist in a vacuum, but are products of a complex industrial system with ideological and cultural implications. The single-star method offers scholars the opportunity to address wider topics in film and media studies through the lens of one star; they are therefore the primary but not singular focus of the scholarship. A multifaceted star like Carole Lombard can become a vehicle to interrogate larger ideas about independent stardom in the classical Hollywood period, feminist ideology, body politics in the 1930s, the star couple, and performance in slapstick and screwball comedy.

In light of the absence of scholarly writing on Lombard's non-screwball films, as well as limited attention to the contours of her comic performance style, it is out of necessity that this book relies significantly on textual analysis. For a variety of reasons including limited accessibility and overall academic neglect, most of the films that I discuss—particularly Lombard's silent comedies and her dramatic films—have been under-studied by biographers and historians. This book will therefore be the first to offer an extended analysis of Lombard's ever-changing star persona and of her film performances across genres and in different performative contexts.

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[20]For scholarship about Lombard, see: Robert Matzen's *Fireball: Carole Lombard and the Mystery of Flight 3* (2017); Michelle Morgan's *Carole Lombard: Twentieth Century Star* (2017); Michael Hammond's "Good Fellowship: Carole Lombard and Clark Gable," in *First Comes Love: Power Couples Celebrity Kinship and Cultural Politics* (2015); Emily Carman's *Introduction to Independent Stardom: Freelance Women in the Hollywood Studio System* (2015).

[21]Lisa Downing and Sue Harris, *From Perversion to Purity: the stardom of Catherine Deneuve* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 8.

The book's methodology also brings together a range of archival research including trade papers, newspapers, studio contracts, and fan magazines. My strong reliance on Hollywood fan magazines as cultural, ideological, and material arbiters of stardom in 1930s and prewar Hollywood brings up the question of how to critically engage with these sources, particularly in light of what Mark Glancy describes as historians' "lingering suspicions of their neutrality and transparency."[22] Given the history of the fan magazine and its role in cultivating stardom in the classical Hollywood period, this suspicion is entirely justified.

By the mid 1930s there were growing concerns from the Production Code Administration (PCA) that pressure from the Hollywood studios' publicity departments led fan magazine editors and writers to "create false impressions in the minds of the public" about Hollywood stars through "inaccuracies, misrepresentation and exaggerations."[23] In response, on August 15, 1934 fifteen magazine editors signed a pledge to publish "clean, constructive and honest material." Additionally, the Studio Publicity Directors Committee arm of the Association of Motion Picture Producers devised a "whitelist" that contained the names of "fifty approved scribes who could be counted on to write tastefully"[24] and who would, in return, be "allowed access to the studio and stars."[25]

The first mass-produced fan magazine was *Motion Picture News Story,* which began in 1911 as a monthly publication "devoted primarily to 'fictionalizing' current films into story form and illustrating them with publicity stills."[26] By 1914, there were "fewer, and shorter, stories … and many more photographs and articles about stars"; by 1916, the word "story" was dropped from the title.[27] Fan magazines like the newly renamed *Motion Picture Magazine, Photoplay,* and *Screenland* shifted their focus to stories and gossip about Hollywood stars that would allegedly give readers "inside information"[28] in order to create "awareness of stars in the run-up to new releases and, just as importantly, to maintain this awareness in the gaps between film appearances."[29] Tamar Jeffers McDonald writes

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[22]Mark Glancy, "*Picturegoer*: The Fan Magazine and Popular Film Culture in Britain During the Second World War," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* Vol. 31, No. 4 (December 2011): 455.

[23]Mary Desjardins, "'Fan Magazine Trouble': The AMPP, Studio Publicity Directors, and the Hollywood Press, 1945–1952," *Film History* Vol. 26, No. 3 (2014): 33.

[24]Ibid, 51.

[25]Desjardins, 33.

[26]Adrienne McLean, "'New Films in Story Form': Movie Story Magazine and Spectatorship," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 3.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Glancy, 457.

[29]Tamar Jeffers McDonald, *Doris Day Confidential: Hollywood, Sex and Stardom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 35.

that the fan magazines "sought to entice readers to see the latest films of their favorite stars, but also served as a means of keeping in touch with them, maintaining a relationship, when the movies were over."[30] The fan magazines cultivated these relationships by promoting an "interactive culture" with their readers through fan mail and correspondence, contests, and self-improvement advice columns that would "transform spectators *of* celebrity culture into participators *in* celebrity culture" (italics original).[31] In doing so, they "endowed readers with a sense that they had a direct impact" on the film industry and the stars "through their participation in or refusal of certain aspects of consumer culture."[32]

The overwhelming percentage of fan magazine readers in the 1930s and early 1940s were middle-class women, and through a focus on "matters relating to fashion, entertaining, and home decorating"[33] the magazines "offered women a variety of ways" to become invested in the movies and stars featured in them, and to "negotiate their own identities beyond their everyday, lived experiences."[34] Fan magazine stories and glamorous covers featuring Hollywood stars were "windows" to the average female reader's "future self, hinting that she will attain these ideal visions" by being an active consumer.[35] So, for example, when a star like Carole Lombard offered advice on how to plan a party[36] or how a woman can succeed in the business world[37] in separate issues of *Photoplay,* the articles were meant to be "glimpses" into Lombard's personal life. Critically, too, they functioned as aspirational "how-to" guides which female readers could use to improve their own lives.[38]

The Hollywood fan magazines' other important and intrinsically related relationship was with the Hollywood studios. Anthony Slide describes it as "incestuous," built upon "trust and mutual necessity."[39] The studios needed the fan magazines "as a collective mouthpiece," while the magazines relied on the "publicity photographs and access to the stars and to the filmmaking

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Marsha Orgeron, "'You Are Invited to Participate': Interactive Fandom in the Age of the Movie Magazine," *Journal of Film and Video* 61, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 4.

[32]Ibid, 7.

[33]Glancy, 457.

[34]Orgeron, 8.

[35]Ellen McCraken, *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms*. (London: MacMillan Press, 1993), 13.

[36]Julie Lang Hunt, "How Carole Lombard Plans A Party," *Photoplay,* February 1935, 47.

[37]Hart Seymore, "Carole Lombard tells: How I Live By A Man's Code," *Photoplay*, June 1937, 12.

[38]Richard Ohmann, Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century (London: Verso, 1996), 220.

[39]Anthony Slide, *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine: A History of Star Makers, Fabricators, and Gossip Mongers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 7.

process," without which they would have "nothing to offer."[40] The studio publicity departments' roles in this relationship were to control and shape the public discourse about their rosters of stars.[41] They worked with the magazines to release curated stories that would reinforce a star's persona, so much so that by the mid 1930s, "virtually all fan magazines were submitting stories for studio approval prior to publication."[42]

Fan magazines are invaluable resources because they provide us with snapshots of how studios molded public discourse to promote and cultivate a star's public persona, as well as the relationship between a star's off-screen image and their film roles. Nevertheless, the consolidation of information about Hollywood stars into the hands of a few powerful individuals necessitates that we read fan magazines and other popular sources with a critically detached eye. With each story we must ask what type of information was being disseminated and why; by doing so, we can begin to understand that what was written largely aimed to preserve and promote a star's studio-engineered persona. Although magazine studies is not a new area in film scholarship, this book's focus on Lombard's stardom is part of an ongoing discussion about the levels of industrialized studio labor and publicity mediation that are involved in producing and sustaining a cohesive star figure. It is therefore important to document the symbiotic relationship between Lombard's on-screen roles and the carefully crafted discourse about her evolving star persona, and how these sources promulgated ideological, moral, and cultural positions about femininity in 1930s and early 1940s America.

Chapter breakdown

This book aims to explain Lombard's historiographical value as a star and performer beyond screwball comedy. It asks the question: in light of Carole Lombard's transformative star persona and work in diverse genres, what is it about Lombard that made her such a perfect fit for screwball comedy, and in what ways have her screwball associations impacted her career and star persona? Additionally, this book explores how Lombard's stardom intersects with a multitude of areas concerning the ideological and cultural implications of female comedy, genre, star couples, and independent stardom, proving her value to various realms within film studies. It progresses chronologically, beginning with her formative years in Hollywood as one of slapstick comedy pioneer Mack Sennett's Bathing Beauties, to her work as

[40]Ibid.

[41]Desjardins, 38.

[42]Slide, 8.

a contract star at Paramount Pictures, to her later years as a freelance artist and budding film producer and, finally, to an analysis of her posthumous stardom over the nearly eighty years since her death.

Chapter 1 focuses on Lombard's career between 1921 and 1929, beginning with Lombard's first film roles through to her two-year tenure with Mack Sennett. In total, Lombard made eighteen one- and two-reel comedies between 1927 and 1929 while working at the Keystone Film Company.[43] This is the first book-length study to offer extended analyses of Lombard's slapstick films, focusing on the juxtaposition between her "feminine" sex appeal and her "masculine" athleticism in her physical comedy performances. This chapter also situates Lombard's slapstick performances against wider industrial and production contexts.

Chapter 2 picks up where the previous chapter ends, exploring Lombard's early sound-era star persona and film roles between 1929 and 1934. Using a case study of Lombard's so-called "Orchid Lady" persona, I explain the multifaceted nature of her stardom beyond screwball comedy. During this period, Lombard performed in a variety of film genres including horror and melodrama, and her accompanying star persona embodied an air of chic refinement that was, in many ways, the antithesis of both her slapstick and screwball identities. I argue against the oft-repeated idea that there is an inherent connection between her slapstick and screwball periods, and seek to understand the ways in which this false claim was reproduced by the Hollywood studios' publicity departments and supported by the popular media in the latter part of the decade, despite historical evidence to the contrary.

Chapter 3 unpacks the details of Lombard's performance style and stardom as it relates to screwball comedy. Building upon the previous chapter's discussion of the female body politics in the silent era, through formal analyses of Lombard's body and voice in five screwball comedy films I examine the demarcation between her conventional feminine beauty and rough-and-tumble physicality. The films I analyze gesture to Lombard's coexistent off-screen star persona, which also centers around her body. Through my focus on female physicality, I situate Lombard's screwball performances against entrenched cultural assumptions about the fragile female body. On a pedagogical level, this chapter's focus on Lombard's physical comedy challenges the established screwball canon and the scholarly portrayal of female physicality in classical Hollywood comedies. For example, scholars such as Stanley Cavell and Alex Clayton both point to Katharine Hepburn's character, Susan Vance, in *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938) as an outlier when discussing the relative lack of female physical comedy performance in screwball films. Although

[43]Larry Swindell, *Screwball: The Life of Carole Lombard* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975), 305.

Bringing Up Baby is a seminal film for comedy scholarship, and while it and Hepburn herself are useful examples to illustrate the possibilities of female physical comedy, it would be productive to widen the scholarly pool to include other stars and films. During her lifetime, Carole Lombard was—and still is today—more closely associated with physical comedy than Katharine Hepburn or any other screwball actress, and should, in my view, take a more prominent position in the comedy corpus.

Chapter 4 addresses Carole Lombard's shifting star persona during her courtship and marriage to top Hollywood star, Clark Gable. During the mid 1930s Lombard's star persona was often situated in discourses that emphasized her independence and unconventional—for its time—progressive gender politics, however, when she married Gable in March 1939, there seemed to be a tension between her single independent identity and her newfound status as a happily domesticated wife. Through formal analyses of fan magazine and popular press discourse I explore how, by the late 1930s, Carole Lombard's star persona was in a state of flux, caught between her screwball and marital identities. While these sides do not necessarily have to be at odds, in Lombard's case, portraying her as a wife and aspiring mother confirmed Hollywood's investment in conservative marital ideology. The chapter presents Lombard's marriage to Gable as a case study to extend the discourse about the levels of industrialized studio labor and publicity mediation that are involved in producing and sustaining a cohesive star figure. I consider how her persona was used, in different ways, by the Hollywood studios to promulgate ideological, moral, and social positions about femininity in 1930s and early 1940s American culture.

By 1939, Lombard was a freelance star, which gave her more control over the types of roles she played and enabled her to articulate the conditions of her labor within the Hollywood studio system. Eager to demonstrate her versatility as an actress, Lombard announced publicly that she would be taking a break from screwball comedy; for the next two years, she appeared in four successive melodramas in which she played women defined by their domesticity.

Chapter 5 argues that Lombard's shift to melodrama worked symbiotically to merge her on- and off-screen personae and strengthened the marital and domestic traits associated with her post 1939 star image. Through an analysis of Lombard's melodrama, this chapter aims to carve out the parameters of melodramatic film acting, places Lombard's dramatic performances in direct contrast to those from her screwball comedies in order to demonstrate the diversity of Lombard's performance style. While Lombard's screwball performances are body-centric and lie primarily in her malleability and ease with physicality, this chapter makes the case that in her dramatic films, she channels her performance inward and reflects her characters' subtle emotional variances through her face and in her voice.

Lombard's screwball persona was also shaped by her personal politics. She was a progressive Democrat and vocal supporter of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal social and cultural programs. She also was a proponent of women's rights, advocating for increased representation of women in business and politics.

Chapter 6 explores Carole Lombard's social activism and gender politics and their effects on her independent star persona. I define her as a proto-feminist, someone with a feminist perspective but without a larger movement in which to couch her politics—her views on gender were quite radical for their time, and mirrored those which have come to be associated with the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. There is an obvious ideological contradiction in Lombard's proto-feminism, largely due to the trappings of traditional femininity and glamour that were essential for a Hollywood actress, and the extent to which her stardom was contained by the cultural framework and ideological apparatus of the Hollywood studio system. This chapter situates Lombard's proto-feminism against the shifting framework of her Hollywood labor, and unpacks the layers of her progressivism in relation to both the gender roles in the 1930s and 1940s and the conservative ideology perpetuated by the Hollywood studios.

This book uncovers the contours of Carole Lombard's stardom and film career in order to make the case that screwball comedy was a significant, but not singular influence on her star persona, and that this association has hindered comprehensive popular and scholarly engagement with her stardom. It seeks to dispel the prevailing conception about Lombard as a performer and star restricted to the realm of screwball comedy to show that, in reality, she was more than just "the Screwball Girl."