

hollywood scandals of the 1920s

Hollywood Scandals of the 1920s: The Glamour and the Shadows

hollywood scandals of the 1920s paint a vivid picture of an era where glitz and glamour collided with controversy and intrigue. This decade, often dubbed the Roaring Twenties, was not just about jazz music, flapper dresses, and the rise of cinema; it was also a time when the dark underbelly of Hollywood began to emerge into the public eye. Behind the silver screen's dazzling smile were stories of betrayal, crime, and moral outrage that captivated audiences and shaped the film industry's future.

The Roaring Twenties: A Backdrop for Hollywood Scandals

The 1920s marked a transformative period for Hollywood. Silent films were at their peak, with stars like Clara Bow, Rudolph Valentino, and Mary Pickford becoming household names. The movie industry was booming, and with newfound fame came immense public scrutiny. The press sensationalized every misstep and personal drama, turning private lives into public spectacles. This environment made Hollywood a hotbed for scandals that would ripple through society and influence the way studios managed their stars.

The Most Infamous Hollywood Scandals of the 1920s

The Mysterious Death of Rudolph Valentino

One of the earliest and most shocking scandals involved Rudolph Valentino, the "Latin Lover" whose sudden death in 1926 at just 31 years old stunned fans worldwide. Valentino's demise was shrouded in mystery and speculation. Officially, he died from complications related to a perforated ulcer, but rumors of foul play and secret affairs swirled around his passing. The frenzy that followed his death highlighted the intense public fascination with celebrity lives and deaths, setting a precedent for future Hollywood scandals.

Impact on Celebrity Culture

Valentino's death demonstrated how the media could amplify a celebrity's personal tragedy into a nationwide event. His funeral attracted thousands of mourners, and his legacy became intertwined with the darker side of fame—where personal privacy was virtually nonexistent. This scandal showed early signs of the media's power in shaping public perception of Hollywood stars.

The Fatty Arbuckle Trial: Hollywood's First Major Sex

Scandal

One of the most explosive and notorious scandals of the decade involved Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, a beloved comedian and actor. In 1921, Arbuckle was accused of raping and accidentally killing actress Virginia Rappe during a party. The trial was a media circus, with newspapers publishing lurid details that captivated and horrified the public.

The Trial and Its Aftermath

Arbuckle was eventually acquitted after three trials, but the damage to his career was irreversible. The scandal exposed the wild party culture of Hollywood and the potential dangers lurking behind the scenes. It also led to calls for stricter moral oversight in the film industry, prompting the creation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), headed by Will H. Hays, which sought to clean up Hollywood's image.

Hollywood's Moral Crisis and the Birth of the Hays Code

The string of scandals in the 1920s, including Arbuckle's trial and other controversies involving drug use, affairs, and violence, alarmed both the public and Hollywood executives. The industry faced mounting pressure to regulate content and star behavior to avoid government censorship.

The Hays Code: Hollywood's Attempt to Self-Regulate

In 1922, Will H. Hays was appointed to oversee the moral standards of films and the conduct of stars. The Hays Code, officially enforced in the 1930s but conceptualized during this scandal-ridden era, aimed to prevent the portrayal of "immoral" behavior and to keep Hollywood respectable.

How the Hays Code Changed Hollywood

- Restricted explicit content related to sex, crime, and drug use.
- Censored depictions of adultery and promiscuity.
- Controlled the public image and personal behavior of actors and actresses.

The Hays Code's influence lasted for decades, fundamentally shaping American cinema and the way scandals were handled. It was, in many ways, a direct response to the moral panic sparked by the 1920s scandals.

Clara Bow: The "It Girl" and Her Tumultuous Private Life

No discussion of hollywood scandals of the 1920s would be complete without mentioning Clara Bow,

the original “It Girl.” Bow’s rise to stardom symbolized the new liberated woman of the Jazz Age, but her private life was anything but simple.

Clara Bow and the Press

Bow was often the subject of gossip columns and tabloid stories, which highlighted her wild parties, rumored affairs, and emotional struggles. The media’s relentless scrutiny took a toll on her mental health and career. Despite her immense popularity, Bow’s scandalous reputation made it difficult for her to transition into the sound film era.

The Role of the Media in Shaping Scandals

Clara Bow’s story illustrates how the burgeoning entertainment press played a dual role: they built stars up and tore them down. The public’s fascination with personal drama fueled the rise of gossip magazines and created a celebrity culture obsessed with scandal.

Other Noteworthy Hollywood Controversies of the 1920s

Beyond the headline-grabbing cases, numerous other incidents rocked Hollywood during this decade:

- **Drug Use and Alcohol:** Despite Prohibition, alcohol and drug abuse were rampant in Hollywood. Stories of secret speakeasies and substance-fueled parties were common.
- **Divorces and Affairs:** Many stars’ marriages crumbled publicly, fueling the tabloid frenzy and moral outrage.
- **Racial and Gender Tensions:** The industry grappled with issues of representation and exploitation, which occasionally boiled over into scandalous public disputes.

These controversies contributed to the image of Hollywood as a place of excess and moral ambiguity, feeding the public’s appetite for scandalous news.

Lessons from Hollywood Scandals of the 1920s

Looking back, the hollywood scandals of the 1920s offer insights into the complex relationship between fame, media, and morality. They show how the rise of celebrity culture brought both adulation and intense scrutiny. For modern readers and aspiring entertainers, these stories highlight the importance of managing one’s public image and the potential consequences of personal choices in the spotlight.

In many ways, the 1920s set the template for how scandals are handled today—through a mix of media sensationalism, industry self-regulation, and public fascination. While the faces and technologies have changed, the core dynamics of Hollywood scandals remain strikingly familiar.

The legacy of these early scandals is a reminder that behind the shimmering surface of fame often lies a story far more complicated—and infinitely more human—than the silver screen reveals.

Frequently Asked Questions

What was the Fatty Arbuckle scandal of the 1920s?

The Fatty Arbuckle scandal involved comedian Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle, who was accused of the rape and manslaughter of actress Virginia Rappe in 1921. Though he was eventually acquitted, the scandal severely damaged his career and reputation.

How did the murder of William Desmond Taylor impact Hollywood in the 1920s?

William Desmond Taylor, a popular film director, was murdered in 1922, and the case remained unsolved. The scandal exposed Hollywood's hidden vices and contributed to calls for moral reform in the film industry.

Who was involved in the Rudolph Valentino scandal?

Rudolph Valentino, a famous silent film star, was involved in several scandals, including rumors about his relationships and accusations of bigamy. His sudden death in 1926 also sparked widespread media frenzy.

What role did the scandal surrounding Wallace Reid play in 1920s Hollywood?

Wallace Reid was a popular actor who became addicted to morphine after a train accident. His struggles with addiction and eventual death in 1923 highlighted the pressures and dark side of Hollywood stardom.

How did the scandal involving Clara Bow influence Hollywood's image in the 1920s?

Clara Bow, known as the 'It Girl,' was involved in several scandals including rumors about her personal life and relationships. Her wild image both captivated and shocked audiences, influencing the flapper culture of the 1920s.

What was the impact of the Hollywood blacklist rumors during

the 1920s?

Although the Hollywood blacklist is more commonly associated with the 1940s and 1950s, rumors and early forms of blacklisting based on moral and political grounds began in the 1920s, affecting careers and industry dynamics.

How did Prohibition contribute to Hollywood scandals in the 1920s?

Prohibition led to secret speakeasies and illegal drinking parties among Hollywood elites, often resulting in publicized arrests and scandals that tarnished the reputation of some stars and studios.

What scandal involved actress Louise Brooks in the 1920s?

Louise Brooks was known for her rebellious nature and flouting Hollywood norms. Her refusal to conform to studio demands and her outspoken personality created controversies, leading to her being blacklisted by some studios.

How did Joan Crawford's early career involve scandal in the 1920s?

Joan Crawford's early career included rumors about her relationships and struggles to break into the industry. Though not involved in major public scandals, the gossip around her shaped her tough public persona.

What was the significance of the scandal involving the Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle trials for Hollywood censorship?

The Arbuckle trials led to increased calls for censorship and the establishment of the Hays Code, as the industry sought to clean up its image and avoid government intervention after the negative publicity.

Additional Resources

Hollywood Scandals of the 1920s: A Decade of Glamour and Controversy

hollywood scandals of the 1920s represent a pivotal chapter in the history of the American film industry, reflecting the turbulent intersection of fame, morality, and the rapidly evolving cultural landscape. This era, often dubbed the Roaring Twenties, was marked by unprecedented growth in cinema's popularity, the rise of celebrity culture, and equally significant public fascination with the darker, more controversial side of stardom. The scandals that erupted during this time not only captivated audiences but also exposed the vulnerabilities and contradictions within Hollywood's golden age, influencing both film production and public perception for decades to come.

The Social and Cultural Backdrop of 1920s Hollywood

The 1920s was a transformative decade in the United States, characterized by post-war economic prosperity, the proliferation of jazz music, the flapper lifestyle, and shifting social mores. Hollywood, as the burgeoning center of the film industry, became a powerful cultural force. Movie stars emerged as national icons, their private lives scrutinized by an increasingly voracious press. The advent of tabloid journalism and fan magazines amplified the reach of Hollywood gossip, turning personal indiscretions into public spectacles.

This environment created fertile ground for numerous hollywood scandals of the 1920s. The tension between the glamorous image studios sought to project and the messy realities of actors' lives often resulted in explosive revelations. Studios wielded considerable power, employing strict morality clauses and publicity departments to manage or suppress damaging stories. Yet, some scandals proved too sensational to contain, leading to widespread media frenzy and public outrage.

Notable Hollywood Scandals of the 1920s

The Fatty Arbuckle Scandal

One of the most infamous hollywood scandals of the 1920s was the Fatty Arbuckle case. Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, a beloved silent film comedian, was accused in 1921 of manslaughter following the death of actress Virginia Rappe at a party he hosted. The trial gripped the nation, with extensive media coverage painting Arbuckle as a villain before any verdict was reached.

Despite three trials—two ending in hung juries and the third in acquittal—the damage to Arbuckle's career was irreparable. Major studios severed ties with him, and he was effectively blacklisted from mainstream Hollywood. This scandal highlighted the era's moral panic over the perceived decadence of Hollywood and underscored how public opinion could override legal outcomes.

The William Desmond Taylor Murder Mystery

The unsolved murder of film director William Desmond Taylor in 1922 remains one of the most enduring hollywood scandals of the 1920s. Taylor was a respected figure in silent cinema, and his death sent shockwaves through the industry. The investigation exposed a web of rumors involving drug use, illicit affairs, and Hollywood's secretive social circles.

Though no one was ever charged, the case intensified calls for greater oversight of the film industry's moral standards. It also fueled speculation about the dark underbelly of Hollywood's glitzy facade, contributing to the establishment of self-censorship mechanisms such as the Motion Picture Production Code later in the decade.

Olive Thomas and the Tragic Death

Olive Thomas, a silent film star and one of Hollywood's early "It Girls," became the subject of scandal following her untimely death in 1920. Thomas died from accidental poisoning in Paris, under circumstances that sparked rumors of drug abuse and suicide.

Her death highlighted the pressures young actresses faced and the limited support structures available in the nascent film industry. The media frenzy surrounding her passing illustrated how hollywood scandals of the 1920s often blended tragedy with sensationalism, feeding public fascination with celebrity vulnerability.

The Impact of Hollywood Scandals on the Film Industry

Hollywood scandals of the 1920s had far-reaching consequences for the motion picture business. Studios responded to the mounting pressure from religious groups, civic organizations, and the general public by instituting stricter codes of conduct for their stars. The fear of government intervention prompted the establishment of the Hays Office in 1922, headed by Will H. Hays, tasked with enforcing moral guidelines and rehabilitating Hollywood's image.

This era's scandals also influenced storytelling trends and the depiction of morality on screen. Films began to reflect conservative values more overtly, though often in a stylized manner that hinted at the complexities beneath. The tension between artistic expression and public decency became a defining characteristic of Hollywood throughout the 20th century.

The Role of the Press and Fan Culture

The media played a dual role in hollywood scandals of the 1920s: as both exposé and propagator. Tabloid newspapers and fan magazines thrived on scandalous content, driving circulation through lurid headlines and speculative reporting. At the same time, studios attempted to manipulate the press to protect their investments and maintain star personas.

This dynamic created a complex ecosystem where rumors could quickly spiral into full-blown scandals. The growing celebrity fan culture meant that audiences felt a personal connection to stars, increasing the stakes of any public scandal. This phenomenon foreshadowed the modern relationship between media, celebrity, and audience.

Legacy and Lessons from 1920s Hollywood Scandals

Analyzing hollywood scandals of the 1920s offers valuable insights into the evolving nature of fame, media, and morality. The decade demonstrated how public fascination with celebrity missteps could simultaneously destroy careers and propel others to greater heights. It also revealed the limits of studio control in an era before digital media, where information spread rapidly and unpredictably.

Moreover, these scandals underscored the cultural tensions of the time—between traditional values

and modern freedoms, between private lives and public personas. The repercussions led to systemic changes within Hollywood, from censorship codes to publicity strategies, many of which shaped the industry's trajectory for decades.

As contemporary audiences continue to engage with Hollywood's history, the scandals of the 1920s remain a compelling example of how glamour and controversy have long been intertwined in the world of entertainment. Understanding this period helps contextualize ongoing conversations about celebrity culture, media ethics, and the complex legacy of fame.

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hollywood scandals of the 1920s: Hollywood Scandals Ethan Parker, 2025-03-02 What really happens behind the velvet rope and beyond the flashing lights of Hollywood? *Hollywood Scandals* delves into the complex underbelly of the entertainment industry, exposing the hidden truths, explosive feuds, and carefully guarded secrets that have shaped its history. This book explores the darker side of fame, fortune, and ambition, revealing the human stories behind the headlines. Three principal themes dominate our investigation: the abuse of power, the manipulation of image, and the price of fame. These themes are central to understanding the recurring patterns of scandal that have plagued Hollywood since its inception. The abuse of power manifests in various forms, from exploitative contracts to harassment and discrimination, impacting both performers and behind-the-scenes personnel. The manipulation of image, driven by studios and publicists, often clashes with the private realities of the individuals involved, creating a breeding ground for deception and shattered illusions. Finally, we examine the destructive consequences of fame, including the loss of privacy, the erosion of mental health, and the vulnerability to exploitation. To provide context, we will examine the evolving social and cultural landscapes that have influenced Hollywood's scandals. This includes changing attitudes towards morality, shifting power dynamics within the industry, and the increasing influence of media and technology. No prior knowledge is required, as we offer clear definitions and explanations of the key concepts. The central argument of *Hollywood Scandals* is that these scandals, while often sensationalized, are symptomatic of systemic issues within the entertainment industry. By uncovering these patterns, we aim to provide a critical understanding of the industry's history and its ongoing struggles with accountability and ethical behavior. The structure of this book unfolds in distinct phases. First, we introduce the core concepts and establish a historical timeline of key scandals. Second, we delve into specific case studies, grouped by thematic areas such as career-ending controversies, bitter rivalries, and the scandals surrounding studio systems. Third, we analyze the long-term consequences and lasting impact of these events on Hollywood's culture and public perception. Finally, we explore potential reforms and strategies for promoting greater transparency and ethical practices within the industry. Our research draws on a variety of sources, including archival documents, court records, personal memoirs, biographies, and investigative journalism. We also incorporate insights from film and television studies, sociology, and psychology to provide a multifaceted perspective on the complex issues. *Hollywood Scandals* connects to broader discussions about power dynamics, media ethics, sociological impact of fame, and cultural studies. These interdisciplinary connections enrich the book's analysis and offer valuable insights for readers interested in a wide range of topics. This book

takes a rigorous, fact-based approach. By presenting evidence and analysis in a clear and compelling manner, we aim to provide a comprehensive and insightful account of the complex forces shaping the entertainment industry. The target audience includes film buffs, students of media and cultural studies, and anyone intrigued by the behind-the-scenes realities of Hollywood. Readers seeking a deeper understanding of the industry's history and its ongoing challenges will find this book particularly valuable. As a work of biography and film and television history, *Hollywood Scandals* adheres to the genre's emphasis on accuracy, thorough research, and engaging storytelling. The scope of this book encompasses major scandals from the early days of Hollywood to the present, with a focus on the American film and television industries. We acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive account of every scandal. The information in this book can be applied to understanding current events in the entertainment industry, analyzing media portrayals of celebrities, and promoting critical thinking about the influence of power and fame. The book addresses ongoing conversations surrounding issues such as diversity, inclusion, and accountability in Hollywood. It examines how past scandals have shaped these discussions and what implications they hold for the future of the industry.

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hollywood scandals of the 1920s: *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* Benjamin McArthur, 2000 The forty years 1880 to 1920 marked the golden age of the American theatre as a national institution, a time when actors moved from being players outside the boundaries of respectable society to being significant figures in the social landscape. As the only book that provides an overview of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatre, *Actors and American Culture* is also the only study of the legitimate stage that overtly attempts to connect actors and their work to the wider aspects of American life.

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hollywood scandals of the 1920s: *Hollywood by Hollywood* Steven Cohan, 2019 The backstudio picture, or the movie about movie-making, is a staple of Hollywood film production harking back to the silent era and extending to the present day. What gives backstudios their

coherence as a distinctive genre, Steven Cohan argues in *Hollywood by Hollywood*, is their fascination with the mystique of Hollywood as a geographic place, a self-contained industry, and a fantasy of fame, leisure, sexual freedom, and modernity. Yet by the same token, if backstudio pictures have rarely achieved blockbuster box-office success, what accounts for the film industry's interest in continuing to produce them? The backstudio picture has been an enduring genre because, aside from offering a director or writer a chance to settle old scores, in branding filmmaking with the Hollywood mystique, the genre solicits consumers' strong investment in the movies. Whether inspiring the movie crazy fan girls of the early teens and twenties or the wannabe filmmakers of this century heading to the West Coast after their college graduations, backstudios have given emotional weight and cultural heft to filmmaking as the quintessential American success story. But more than that, a backstudio picture is concerned with shaping perceptions of how the film industry works, with masking how its product depends upon an industrial labor force, including stardom, and with determining how that work's value accrues from the Hollywood brand stamped onto the product. Cohan supports his well theorized and well researched claims with nuanced discussions of over fifty backstudios, some canonical and well-known, and others obscure and rarely seen. Covering the hundred-year timespan of feature length film production, *Hollywood by Hollywood* offers an illuminating perspective for considering anew the history of American movies.

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hollywood scandals of the 1920s: *William Desmond Taylor* Bruce Long, 1991-01-01 Now in paperback. William Desmond Taylor (1872-1922) was a leading silent film director remembered as the victim of Hollywood's most sensational unsolved murder, which shook the nation and shattered the reputations of several top Hollywood stars. Until now, Taylor's film career and leadership role in

the Hollywood film industry have been completely overshadowed by the scandal of his death. By reprinting over 400 items from contemporary newspapers, magazines, and trade journals, the book reveals Taylor's life in Hollywood—from his arrival as a minor actor in 1912 until his death in 1922 as one of Hollywood's top directors. These annotated clippings and articles, many containing Taylor's own words, provide substantial insight into Hollywood life and film production during the decade that transformed Hollywood into the movie capital of the world. Included in the book is the most extensive filmography of Taylor's work ever published. Taylor's murder is also examined, including a critical analysis of two published 'solutions' to the crime.

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hollywood scandals of the 1920s: *Twilight of the Idols* Mark Lynn Anderson, 2011-04-18 *Twilight of the Idols* revisits some of the sensational scandals of early Hollywood to evaluate their importance for our contemporary understanding of human deviance. By analyzing changes in the star system and by exploring the careers of individual stars—Wallace Reid, Rudolph Valentino, and Mabel Normand among them—Mark Lynn Anderson shows how the era's celebrity culture shaped public ideas about personality and human conduct and played a pivotal role in the emergent human sciences of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Anderson looks at motion picture stars who embodied various forms of deviance—narcotic addiction, criminality, sexual perversion, and racial indeterminacy. He considers how the studios profited from popularizing ideas about deviance, and how the debates generated by the early Hollywood scandals continue to affect our notions of personality, sexuality, and public morals.

hollywood scandals of the 1920s: *Cinema as Pulpit* J. Ryan Parker, 2014-01-10 Sherwood Pictures is the filmmaking ministry of Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia, and the leading producer of church-based, independent Christian films. This book situates their work in the history of religion and film in America and shows how they bring to fruition early 20th century Protestant expectations for the use of film in the life of the church and their hopes for a vibrant Christian film industry. Also covered are the handful of churches, inspired by Sherwood, that have taken up their own cameras to create a growing church film movement. This book offers another examination of the relationship between conservative evangelical Protestant Christianity and the wider popular culture.

hollywood scandals of the 1920s: *Horrible Prettiness* Robert Allen, 2000-11-09 Robert Allen's compelling book examines burlesque not only as popular entertainment but also as a complex and transforming cultural phenomenon. When Lydia Thompson and her controversial female troupe of British Blondes brought modern burlesque to the United States in 1868, the result was electric. Their impertinent humor, streetwise manner, and provocative parodies of masculinity brought them enormous popular success—and the condemnation of critics, cultural commentators, and even women's rights campaigners. Burlesque was a cultural threat, Allen argues, because it inverted the normal world of middle-class social relations and transgressed norms of proper feminine behavior

and appearance. Initially playing to respectable middle-class audiences, burlesque was quickly relegated to the shadow-world of working-class male leisure. In this process the burlesque performer lost her voice, as burlesque increasingly revolved around the display of her body. Locating burlesque within the context of both the social transformation of American theater and its patterns of gender representation, Allen concludes that burlesque represents a fascinating example of the potential transgressiveness of popular entertainment forms, as well as the strategies by which they have been contained and their threats defused.

hollywood scandals of the 1920s: Hollywood Hates Hitler! Chris Yogerst, 2020-08-25 In September 1941, a handful of isolationist senators set out to tarnish Hollywood for warmongering. The United States was largely divided on the possibility of entering the European War, yet the immigrant moguls in Hollywood were acutely aware of the conditions in Europe. After Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass), the gloves came off. Warner Bros. released the first directly anti-Nazi film in 1939 with Confessions of a Nazi Spy. Other studios followed with such films as The Mortal Storm (MGM), Man Hunt (Fox), The Man I Married (Fox), and The Great Dictator (United Artists). While these films represented a small percentage of Hollywood's output, senators took aim at the Jews in Hollywood who were supposedly "agitating us for war" and launched an investigation that resulted in Senate Resolution 152. The resolution was aimed at both radio and movies that "have been extensively used for propaganda purposes designed to influence the public mind in the direction of participation in the European War." When the Senate approved a subcommittee to investigate the intentions of these films, studio bosses were ready and willing to stand up against the government to defend their beloved industry. What followed was a complete embarrassment of the United States Senate and a large victory for Hollywood as well as freedom of speech. Many works of American film history only skim the surface of the 1941 investigation of Hollywood. In Hollywood Hates Hitler! Jew-Baiting, Anti-Nazism, and the Senate Investigation into Warmongering in Motion Pictures, author Chris Yogerst examines the years leading up to and through the Senate Investigation into Motion Picture War Propaganda, detailing the isolationist senators' relationship with the America First movement. Through his use of primary documents and lengthy congressional records, Yogerst paints a picture of the investigation's daily events both on Capitol Hill and in the national press.

hollywood scandals of the 1920s: Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Neepa Majumdar, 2010-10-01 Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! maps out the early culture of cinema stardom in India from its emergence in the silent era to the decade after Indian independence in the mid-twentieth century. Neepa Majumdar combines readings of specific films and stars with an analysis of the historical and cultural configurations that gave rise to distinctly Indian notions of celebrity. She argues that discussions of early cinematic stardom in India must be placed in the context of the general legitimizing discourse of colonial improvement that marked other civic and cultural spheres as well, and that vernacular modernist anxieties over the New Woman had limited resonance here. Rather, it was through emphatically nationalist discourses that Indian cinema found its model for modern female identities. Considering questions of spectatorship, gossip, popularity, and the dominance of a star-based production system, Majumdar details the rise of film stars such as Sulochana, Fearless Nadia, Lata Mangeshkar, and Nargis.

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