

Abstract:

### **Tijuana Bibles and the Pornographic Iteration of Hollywood.**

‘Tijuana bibles’, illicit, explicit and illegally produced pornographic comics of the 1920s-50s portrayed well-known figures in graphic sex acts with little narrative justification. Featuring images, subjects and language which was legally impossible and engaging openly with officially unmentionable narratives of scandal and rumour of the time, these comics attempted to put their own perverse spin on celebrity identities and delivered on what Hollywood narratives could only hint at. Hollywood’s early star system relied on a fine balance of carefully controlled star personas and a fan culture of speculation and gossip and while the studios were increasingly required to present and defend a puritanical image for their stars, these stars were simultaneously sex symbols, and audiences craved insights into the private lives they imagined for them. The pornographic narratives of Tijuana Bibles had an inherent potential to celebrate, denigrate, and satirise both their celebrity subjects and Hollywood itself, unhampered by an official studio ‘line’, the worry of litigation, or any notion of taste or decency.

The booklets render a repertoire of sex acts/preferences into simple single frames, each recognizable as the type of pornographic subgenre Schaschek sees born out of ‘repeated plots, figures, settings, [and] aesthetics’ (28). However recognizable these generic positions may be, repeating visual tropes within the Tijuana bibles, in pornographic art and narrative more widely, their function as pornography is dependent on a wider seriality. In utilizing characters and celebrities from other media they repeat ongoing tropes and themes of familiar star-texts; personas contained by the Hollywood narrative or the frame of the strip cartoon are expanded to expose what censorship forbade.

While the hints and allegations of gossip columns and newspaper scandals provided a frank sexual discourse at odds with the suggestive Hollywood model of ‘metonymic substitution’ (Schaschek:2), the Tijuana bibles filled a pornographic niche: offering satisfaction to those who wanted more from their celebrity story. By placing the generic sexual acts into the plots, figures and settings of celebrity scandals and Hollywood stars/characters, they fill the gap of the erotic/imaginary, the synecdoche of both screen and scandal narratives – making the genitals on display less important – and less erotic – than ‘who those genitals belong to’(Pillai:3) and through adopting the aesthetics of Hollywood narrative presentation, they co-opt, reproduce and extend those stars’ personas, characters’ stories and generic hapticity into a forbidden pornographic genre (Williams:1991).

The bibles themselves and the official reactions to them, alongside contemporaneous and retrospective discussion of the scandals of the day allow cultural historians a glimpse of an unofficial popular discourse, to see what audiences knew or guessed of the stars private lives, and to examine the boundaries between what was and was not permissible to say. In examining the relational frames of stardom and sexual scandal that are drawn upon to form the erotic context of these pornographic narratives, we can understand what their producers – outside the Hollywood/critical milieu – understood and expected their readers understand of the scandals, double entendres of suggestive gossip, and erotic potentialities of Hollywood’s sexual symbolism.

## **Author Biographies:**

**Phyll Smith** writes on seriality and the cultural politics of fringe media texts - those ancillary or unofficial media (by)products and their producers and consumers: non-feature film products of the 1930-40s such as Serials and newsreels, and their print tie-ins and commentaries, in comics, advertising and magazines; unofficial publications such as political pamphlets, fan magazines and cartoons; and the moral and political panics and backlashes to these often lowbrow texts.

He is Associate Lecturer at University of East Anglia and co-ordinates the '*To Be Continued...*' *Serials, series and sequential viewing* research network. His phd research centres on *American Sound Serials: their audiences, exhibition and producers* and his biography of radical pamphleteer and journalist Tom Wintringham, *The Last English Revolutionary* is published by the London School of Economics/Sussex Academic Press 2012.

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She has previously taught film studies, media studies and photographic theory at undergraduate level and specialises in the study of leisure industries, consumer culture and broader social contexts surrounding Hollywood cinema in the early, to mid-twentieth century. She recently completed her PhD thesis '*More Than Pin-Up Lines*': *Public Femininity and the Reception of Hollywood Glamour in Second World War Britain* at the University of East Anglia.

Amongst other academic publications, she has written 'Glamorous Bait for an Amorous Killer!: How Audiences Were Lured By Lucille' for *Frames* cinema journal, co-written 'Betty Grable: An American Icon in Wartime Britain' for *The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* and written a chapter on feminine performance in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* for the forthcoming edited collection *Howard Hawks: New Perspectives*.