Paris in the Dark

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In February 1931 the French film magazine Cinéa announced its current topic of interest on the cover page and on the back: “In this issue: the French talking film.” Just under that, the names of two performers, with a photo portrait of each on the front and on the back: Maurice Chevalier and Marlene Dietrich. The rest of the issue served to confirm the linkage between the topic and the stars. Chevalier and Dietrich, whose photos bookended the issue, emerged on the pages in between as the first and greatest of a new generation of stars made possible by sound film, stars of international importance but who also could be claimed by the nation—by France—as two of its own.

The new sound technology that helped produce stars like Chevalier and Dietrich had a significant impact on the ways that films played in Parisian cinemas. The sound of the voice might help create a sensational, extended run of a single film in the city, or the cinematic geography of Paris might come to be understood in terms of the route a particular sound film might take as it made its rounds of different neighborhoods. During this transitional period, the screening of a sound film at a particular cinema followed a week or two later by a silent film threw into relief for neighborhood audiences the overlapping and also different pleasures of the two technologies. With the film journalism of the period, we can read not just where films played and for how long, but also what the responses might be to going to the cinema to hear a special voice, or to watch once again a particular face. Film exhibition, film sound, the film image, and the film press, all in a particular place, can show us something of what it meant, for the typical fan who picked up a magazine like Cinéa or the cinéphile who wrote for it, to experience a shift to a new technology and a change to a different kind of star.
Including Cinéa there were dozens of film tabloids and journals in France during this period; the Annuaire général des lettres for 1933–34, which kept meticulous track of such things, lists around thirty-five, most of them concentrating their attention on Paris, although there were others with interests beyond the capital. La Revue de l'écran, for example, a trade journal for cinema managers, focused on Marseille and the area around it, while Les Spectacles reviewed entertainments in Lille, and Les Spectacles d'Alger examined film, theatre, and music halls in and around Algiers. Jean Tedesco, who managed the fashionable Vieux-Colombier cinema in Paris’s sixth arrondissement, published Cinéa, and because of Tedesco’s well-known interest in film history and the film archive (the Vieux-Colombier specialized in screenings of experimental films, documentaries, and early silent movies), his magazine’s ongoing concern with developments in the medium made perfect sense. Almost all of the film magazines devoted coverage to the history of cinema, and they signaled to their readers that the transition to sound film, even as it was happening, constituted an important period in the growth of motion pictures. These publications interpreted the transition, at least in part, through its effects on film stardom. Information detailing the sound of the language spoken by the star became a means of distilling news about the shift to talkies, much more so than discussions of the changes in equipment or industrial practice, or any of the other important but more mundane aspects of le cinéma parlant.

Among the most compelling of the stars of this new cinema were Chevalier and Dietrich, and reading about them in the film magazines of the period provides a sense of the experience of this transitional era in French cinema. Looking through the various narratives of the shift to sound films, in Cinéa, Pour Vous, Les Spectacles d’Alger, and other sources from the period, we can begin to understand how movie enthusiasts learned about film as a local, regional, and international phenomenon. These sources also help to explain audience preferences for stars and movies, as well as many of the nuts and bolts of the transition to sound; how films were shown and in what languages, for instance, or the stars whose appeal seemed limited to France or extended well beyond it, and also the impact on stardom of rapid technological innovation and implementation.

Studying stardom, film exhibition, and film reception through the primary materials of French film journalism provides the possibility of differential histories of sound film, and also helps complicate our understanding of national cinema. In the cases of Chevalier and Dietrich during the transition to sound, we can see how, for some audiences, stars themselves might signify the nation, often regardless of the country where their films were produced, and how, in
Figures 3.1 and 3.2  Maurice Chevalier and Marlene Dietrich on the cover and back of Cinéa, February 1931. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
the case of Chevalier, a star’s “Frenchness” might vary between France and France’s colonies, or how Dietrich, the actress from Berlin, came to indicate a broadly understood cosmopolitan European identity that might be imagined to be as much French as German.

Placing Paris as well as France and French culture at the center of this inquiry shows us how the transition to sound generated specific kinds of stardom. This combined history of film sound and movie stardom charts the impact of new technologies on an international commodity (the cinema) and on a specific industrial practice (the production of celebrity). In particular, this chapter’s study of film reception and exhibition examines how fans in Paris and elsewhere in France as well as in North Africa came to understand and appreciate Marlene Dietrich and Maurice Chevalier in particular, but also other stars who emerged during this period, and to update and adapt their devotion to stars more fully associated with silent cinema. That cinema certainly had produced an extraordinary number of international movie stars; Asta Nielsen from the German film industry, Charlie Chaplin from Hollywood, and Max Linder from France come to mind immediately. For the new movie celebrities of the transitional period, however, the sound of the performer’s voice became the marker of stardom, while for many of the great silent actors, even as they made their transitions to sound, the image remained transcendent.

**Maurice Chevalier and the Era of the New International Star**

A fan poll organized by the tabloid *Mon Film* named Maurice Chevalier “King of French Film” for 1930, just one year after he began starring in movies. Chevalier displaced the previous year’s winner, Jean Dehelly, who had started out as a leading man in silent movies in the early 1920s and would be out of films entirely by 1932. Thus Chevalier, the great international celebrity of sound film, supplanted a silent film star whose fame never really extended much beyond France.

The sound cinema created other major stars. Indeed, rather than eliminating the international performer from cinema (as in the well-chronicled demise of Emil Jannings, whose thick German accent made it impossible for him to appear in Hollywood talking films), sound movies produced new forms of global celebrity. In France alone, Hollywood stars such as Joan Crawford and Jeanette MacDonald enjoyed great vogue during the early 1930s, as did Dorothea Wieck, the German star of *Jeunes filles en uniform*, as well as many other performers from Europe and the United States. Many French stars made films intended only for French-speaking audiences but that were produced in other countries, or in France by foreign film companies: Charles Boyer, for
instance, who starred in French movies made in Hollywood and Germany, and Francoise Rosay, who appeared with Chevalier in German director Ludwig Berger’s *Le Petit Café* (1931) and also starred in other French films made by the American studio Paramount at its Joinville facility outside Paris. These performers, from Crawford to Rosay, were international stars in terms of where their films were exhibited, or where they worked and for whom.

Still other stars were more purely national, such as Gaby Morlay, who worked consistently for Pathé-Natan, or Pierre Larquey, who made films for Alex Nalpas, Les Films diamants, and other of France’s myriad movie companies from the period. Their films were shown almost exclusively to French-speaking audiences, but even these viewers ranged beyond France, as they might be watching movies in Belgium or Switzerland or North Africa or Southeast Asia. As just one example among many that demonstrates the point, and the differences between these French stars and those with a more fully international appeal, during the last week of 1931 and the first of 1932, the Majestic cinema in Algiers showed Georges Milton’s latest film, *Pas sur la bouche* (1931), while the Splendid cinema there exhibited Chevalier in *Le Petit Café*. This screening of *Pas sur la bouche* showed the full extent of Milton’s fame, at its height in France (like Chevalier, Milton was a star of the Parisian music hall), but reaching only as far as North Africa. For a Chevalier film, an exhibition in Algiers counted as just one more stop on a global distribution plan.⁶

Jean Dehelly giving way to Chevalier, the silent star to the sound icon, shows the cinema’s movement from old to fully contemporary technology. Even before the movie magazine fan poll that anointed this new king of French film, though, Chevalier had been hailed as an entirely modern hero in France, one who represented both the rise of a new cinema and the decline of an old one. In April 1930, *Cinéa* put Chevalier on its cover in a special issue on the star, on the occasion of the French premiere of Ernst Lubitsch’s *Parade d’amour*. *Cinéa* ran dozens of photos of Chevalier, from childhood to his successes in the music hall to his trip to the United States and his film work at Paramount, as well as appreciations and histories (“M.C.,” “Son Secret,” “Le Succès de Chevalier”), in a section covering half of the forty-plus-page magazine.⁷ But most of the rest of the issue, that part not devoted to Chevalier, considered the passing of the silent cinema and the kind of film that would be lost forever.

In the first sentence of his opening editorial, the publisher, Jean Tedesco, lamented that “the silent cinema is in its death throes.” Another article considered that “misunderstood film,” the avant-garde silent classic *Un chien andalou* (1929), perhaps the most talked-about film of the decade. Still another
reproduced Pierre Mac Orlan’s preface to La Petite Marchande d’allumettes, the novelization of Jean Renoir’s 1928 silent film. At the end of the issue, after all the celebrations of Chevalier, Henri Baranger considered the state of cinema. He wrote that one of his film idols was King Vidor, whom he cited as the Dante and the Balzac of motion pictures, and whose silent film La Foule suggested the possibility of a “human cinema.” As part of an issue so suffused with photographs of Chevalier, Baranger wrote that he himself still thought constantly of the great faces of silent cinema, for instance William S. Hart and Sessue Hayakawa. This special issue on Chevalier not only celebrated the triumph of the Hollywood sound film in France and the rise of a new kind of film personality, but also contemplated the loss of an older and different kind of cinema, and a different kind of star.

**The Sound of the Star**

In the French film tabloids, and in the manner of Chevalier and Dehelly, Dietrich, too, found herself in competition, as it were, with another performer. But rather than displacing her, as Chevalier did with the now forgotten Dehelly during the transition to sound, Dietrich coexisted with the greatest
international star of silent cinema, Greta Garbo. Dietrich had only become a leading woman in 1929, in a few silent films of varying quality. Her appearance as Lola Lola in Josef von Sternberg’s *L’Ange bleu*, from 1930, stands out as one of the great star turns in cinema history, and made Dietrich the equal not only of Garbo and Charlie Chaplin among stars from the silent era, but also of Chevalier, who had already achieved much of his celebrity, in the United States and Europe, from his music hall performances.

Movie fans and film critics in Paris and the rest of France had anticipated *L’Ange bleu* for months, as it had opened to acclaim earlier in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. When the film premiered in Paris at the fashionable Ursulines cinema in the fifth arrondissement, it caused an immediate sensation. The Ursulines only had around three hundred seats, and it specialized in artistic rather than simply commercial films. To give just a brief sense of the typical viewing experience at the Ursulines, *L’Ange bleu* replaced a program of short films made before the war and also some avant-garde movies that played with G. W. Pabst’s *Le Journal d’une fille perdue* (*Tagebuch einer Verlorenen*; 1929). More broadly, the screening of Sternberg’s film at the Ursulines shows the cinematic fluidity of 1930s Parisian film culture. When *L’Ange bleu* played at other cinemas in Paris, the venues were often grander than the Ursulines, but in particular they were sites that concerned themselves with cinema-as-usual rather than cinema-as-art, with *L’Ange bleu*, as well as those other films that went from the Ursulines to other locations, clearly counting as both.

The film wouldn’t go to any of those cinemas for a very long time. *L’Ange bleu* played at the Ursulines for almost a year, until early November 1931. That kind of a first run wasn’t unheard of in Paris at the time, but it was nonetheless very impressive. Far more common for an extraordinarily popular film would be Eddie Cantor’s *Whoopee* (1930), which opened a few months after *L’Ange bleu* in early March 1931, at another fashionable cinema in the fifth arrondissement, the Panthéon. Cantor’s film played with a Thelma Todd short and a Krazy Kat cartoon until the end of May, and then was replaced by the Marx Brothers in *Cocoanuts* (1929) for just a few weeks and then Douglas Fairbanks in *Reaching for the Moon* (1930), which played for at least two months, all while *L’Ange bleu* kept on showing four times a day at the Ursulines, week after week. When Sternberg’s film left the Ursulines, to be replaced by another German film, Pabst’s *L’Opéra de quat’sous* (*Die 3 Groschen-Oper*; 1931), it was major news. The newspaper *Paris-soir* took note, and in a way that stressed the cinematic geography of the city. *Paris-soir* wrote that after around a thousand screenings, “*L’Ange bleu* will cross the Seine and continue its magnificent career on the right bank,” at the Aubert-Palace in the ninth arrondissement.
In fact, for a few years, it seems as if *L’Ange bleu* played continuously in Paris, and as late as 1933 the film had an extended reprise in the very well-heeled second arrondissement at the Corso-Opéra cinema.\(^{14}\)

During its opening week, *L’Ange bleu* was only one of a number of important films in Paris. The newest of all major French cinemas, the Miracles in the second arrondissement, opened with King Vidor’s melodrama with an African American cast, *Hallelujah* (1929), in the same week that *L’Ange bleu* began its run at the Ursulines. Critics hailed *Hallelujah* as an important aesthetic and social document, as a film of undoubted “high class.”\(^{15}\) Vidor’s pastoral film took its place as the folk equivalent of the great movie event in France, and probably the rest of Europe (before *L’Ange bleu*), Universal Studio’s *À l’Ouest rien de nouveau*, which was still in a months-long first run in Paris. That film proved the capacity of the cinema to produce a vivid social document, to reach intellectuals and also average fans, and to align the motion picture with a global antiwar movement. That same week, the film that critics hoped would signal the future of French cinema, René Clair’s *Sous les toits de Paris*, continued an extended run in the city, at the Jeanne d’Arc in the thirteenth arrondissement.\(^{16}\)

When *L’Ange bleu* opened in Paris, the exhibition strategy was fitted only to that film, and emphasized the special nature of Dietrich’s voice and the importance of hearing it. The film showed four times a day at the Ursulines, twice each in the afternoon and evening. For the first afternoon and evening screenings, audiences saw the French version of *L’Ange bleu*, a film sonore—music and effects over a silent film with French intertitles, but with Dietrich performing her songs in German. For the second showings, fans could see and hear *la version intégrale*, the German version, a fully talking film, with all speech and songs in that language.

*La Semaine à Paris* ran an article by Charles de Saint-Cyr, “Twenty Things about *L’Ange bleu*,” that covered the opening of the film and that listed this dual-version exhibition “innovation” as the most compelling detail of Dietrich’s movie.\(^{17}\) For Saint-Cyr, the French, largely silent version emphasized the film’s international appeal, while with the German version, even poorly understood by many audiences, “the words added to the voyage” on which *L’Ange bleu* took its viewers. Anecdotal evidence indicates that both versions were equally popular.\(^{18}\) Of course, while the film also featured Emil Jannings, a star of great international importance at the time, the astonishing enthusiasm for *L’Ange bleu* always rested on the impact of hearing Dietrich, either in the French version or the German one. In just one example among many, when the film opened in Algiers in June 1931, *Les Spectacles d’Alger*, in its review, praised Dietrich’s performance and then marveled at her “husky” and “captivating” voice.\(^{19}\)
The literature and mythology about Dietrich and *L’Ange bleu* are full of references to the importance of seeing the star. Heinrich Mann, for example, the author of the novel on which the film was based, reportedly told Jannings that the success of the film depended not so much on the great actor’s performance, but on “the naked thighs of Miss Dietrich.” There is also ample evidence that the success of *L’Ange bleu*, and of its new star, depended just as much on Miss Dietrich’s “husky” voice, and hearing it in the German sound film, or as practically the only instance of speech in the French version.

**The Sound of Chevalier**

Chevalier’s voice, like Dietrich’s, came to signify his stardom, and even, in some contexts, his historic importance to cinema. Chevalier’s 1929 American sound film debut, *La Chanson de Paris* (*Innocents of Paris*; 1929), came to Algiers in
January 1930. For the opening, Les Spectacles d’Alger announced, “we have seen and heard, in our city, several artists onscreen with synchronized sound,” and then dismissed those efforts as “interesting,” but not really cinema.21 Now, the Splendid cinema presented La Chanson de Paris, a complete sound film and the first shown in the city, with the star singing in both French and English.

Audiences in Algiers apparently had seen any number of sound shorts, the kind that the major movie companies and even some of the small ones produced in order to highlight the new technology. In fact, only the week before in Algiers, viewers at the Régent cinema had witnessed just such a program of sound movies.22 If we believe Les Spectacles d’Alger, however, there was no true sound film in Algiers before Chevalier’s, and no voice worth hearing there before his. The success of the film was such that it was held over a second week at the Splendid, and Les Spectacles d’Alger ran an update on the popularity of the movie and its star. Without Chevalier, La Chanson would have been a “bad film,” but the actor’s charm dominated everything else about the story. In the film, “he swims, he dances, he appears miserably dressed and then elegantly, in his smoking jacket and trademark straw hat, he plays the comedy simply and he sings.” The report continued, as if to emphasize the star’s voice, “he sings and one listens, thanks to the clarity of his diction and the perfection of the sound apparatus.”23 Chevalier’s singing voice was the marvel of the film, which commanded the audience’s attention, and was equaled only by the technology that brought that voice to the people in the cinema.

The impact of Chevalier’s film and the sound of his voice in Algiers indicate something about global distribution practices during this period. La Chanson de Paris was ready for cinemas in the United States in May 1929 and opened in Paris in October of that year. The three months it took for the film to go from Paris to Algiers was not at all unusual and provides a sense of the relative peripheral cinematic status of North Africa to France and particularly to Paris. Chevalier’s film played in Algiers even before Al Jolson in Le Chanteur de jazz. That film, of course, which had opened in Paris in January 1929, is the one that typically receives credit as the first significant sound film and for establishing the credibility of sound technology.

Jolson became a major star in France as a result of Le Chanteur de jazz. He was popular, as well, in North Africa, and when Le Chanteur de jazz opened in Algiers at the end of February 1930, Les Spectacles d’Alger acknowledging the film’s success in Paris, called it a “marvel of cinematographic art,” and duly noted the sociological importance of the representation of the “religious mores of North American Israelites of Polish origin.”24 But in that city and perhaps the rest of the region, it was Chevalier who began the sound era,
and his film that signaled a new moment in cinema. For the French colonies, *La Chanson de Paris* served the same historical function that *Le Chanteur de jazz* did for most of the rest of the world.

**Dietrich and Garbo**

After her appearance in *L’Ange bleu*, Dietrich also seemed to mark the arrival of a new era. *Cinéa* put a photograph of Dietrich in *Coeurs brûlés* (*Morocco*; 1930), her next film, on the cover of its issue for April 1931. In an article about “Current Trends in Cinema” in the same issue, *Cinéa* claimed that the international successes of *Les Lumières de la ville*, *Sous les toits de Paris*, and *L’Ange bleu* suggested the possibility that films that added sound only sparingly to compelling images might be best suited, during this transitional period, for reaching wide global audiences. At least to the film journals, however, and perhaps movie fans, Dietrich’s greatest significance was the challenge she posed to the most important current star in cinema, and one whose sound debut seemed so long delayed, Greta Garbo.

A month after the Paris premiere of *L’Ange bleu*, *Pour Vous* posed the question directly to readers and to experts: “Whom Do You Prefer? Greta Garbo or Marlene Dietrich?” The writer Pierre Mac Orlan, still unconvinced of Dietrich’s charm, chose Garbo. Ever the gentleman, the great French tennis player Jean Borotra refused to choose. The sentiment among several others echoed Mac Orlan, and tended toward a preference for Garbo. Two weeks later, readers weighed in and also seemed to prefer Garbo, at least in part because Dietrich was so new to the screen. One fan pinpointed the difference between the two as precisely the difference between the kinds of cinema with which they were associated. With Dietrich, he wrote, it is her “sex appeal that speaks,” while with Garbo, it is “the look.” For this viewer, Garbo represented the sensual pleasures of the old technology, so dependent on the image, and Dietrich, whose attraction “spoke” to the audience, those of the new.

Garbo’s cinematic presence in France and the French colonies was a constant of the period. In Hanoi, for instance, the 1934 opening of *Grand Hôtel*, Garbo’s film from 1932, was understood to be a significant cultural event, while in Paris there always seemed to be a Garbo film playing somewhere during this period. Often, her films and Dietrich’s showed at the same time. When Dietrich in *Blonde Vénus* (1932) ran in fourteen cinemas throughout Paris in March 1933, Garbo’s *La Courtisane* (*Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise*; 1931) played in the ninth and eighteenth arrondissements. In Marseille in April 1934, *Grand Hôtel* returned to cinemas, with this reprise indicating the earlier success of the film there, probably the year before, and just two weeks
after a similar “seconde vision” for Dietrich’s 1933 movie, *Cantique d’amour* (*Song of Songs*; 1933).\(^{30}\)

Two Garbo films, however, point out the perceived differences between the stars, differences connected to silent and sound film technologies. In Algiers in 1931, Garbo’s *La Belle Ténébreuse* played at the Splendid cinema just one week after *L’Ange bleu* had shown there. The review of this silent film, in *Les Spectacles d’Alger*, emphasized the experience of looking at the movie and particularly at Garbo’s face, just as the same newspaper previously had lauded the huskiness of Dietrich’s voice. “Greta Garbo,” the review explained, “is that accomplished type of femme fatale whose magic face reflects a powerful interior emotion.”\(^{31}\)

That same year, Garbo’s first talking film, *Anna Christie* (1930), which had been so carefully crafted by its Hollywood studio, MGM, and its director, Clarence Brown, opened in Paris. Of course this opening constituted a major cinematic event in the city, and most periodicals devoted a great deal of coverage to the film. *Pour Vous*, in its review, demonstrated something of the French critical consensus about the film. Somehow, sound seemed not to matter, and as great as the film was, it may have been better served by an older technology. In the first sentence of his discussion of the film, René Lehmann wrote, “In watching and listening to *Anna Christie*, I dreamed of the beautiful silent film that Clarence Brown could have made.”\(^{32}\) Listening to Garbo talk had little of the electricity of hearing Dietrich’s voice, and signified nothing of the new potential of cinema.

**Stardom and the Nation**

Much more than silent film stars, whose nationality or regional affiliations could never be given away by their accents, both Dietrich and Chevalier were understood as national subjects, as German in the former case and French in the latter. But one of the signs of their success, of their special status as great stars of the new technology, was the possibility for a shifting national identity and for being understood and appreciated by fans in both local and international terms. Chevalier, of course, was known and advertised as the greatest of all French stars. When Paramount announced its coming film season in 1931 in *Les Spectacles*, the trade journal covering northern France, the studio began by praising the previous year’s Chevalier “super-productions,” *Parade d’amour* and *La Grande Mare* (*The Big Pond*; 1930). Then Paramount trumpeted both its American and French films, and exulted that “right next to the great stars of Hollywood, you will applaud . . . the elite stars of France,” including Yvette Andréyor, Fernand Gravey, Marguerite Moreno, and, naturally, Chevalier, insisting on the fully national status of the performer who nevertheless had left France for the United States.\(^{33}\)
Newspapers and trade journals in North Africa, even more than those in Paris or elsewhere in France, stressed Chevalier’s “Frenchness,” and so seemed to align audiences in the best cinemas in peripheral locations with those in the metropolitan centers of French culture. When Chevalier appeared in Algiers in person, in the 1930 revue *Un dimanche à New York*, *Les Spectacles d’Alger* asserted the star’s importance as a French treasure while lovingly referring to him as the “celebrated national music hall star.” Three years later, when the film *Une heure près de toi* (*One Hour with You*; 1932) premiered there, the same newspaper claimed the French performer as theirs, informing readers that the film starred “our own” Maurice Chevalier.

This claim of Chevalier’s quintessential Frenchness, and of bringing that national quality to France’s colonies, came at a time when, for French singing stars, the voice stood for both country and culture. When the greatest of all French music hall stars, Mistinguett, played Algiers, she made sure to bring France, or at least Paris, with her. In her 1930 appearance at the most important theatre in the city, the Majestic, she sang one song of purely local interest, “Bonjour Alger,” but then began her revue, *Ca c’est Paris*. She came back two years later, this time in *Voilà Paris*. The newspaper review for that performance acknowledged that “exporting Paris is no easy business,” but noted that Mistinguett triumphed nonetheless. Through her voice and her singing, the chanteuse Mistinguett, like Chevalier, was able to bring France, as well as its greatest city, to places and listeners beyond its borders but nevertheless aligned emotionally and geopolitically with that country.

The French film press, however, always emphasized that Chevalier mostly made movies in the United States, and that he was a major star there as well. He had become so identified with his American work that, when he came back to France for a few months in 1930, newspapers reported the triumphant return of a national hero who one day might have his own museum in France, in the manner of Balzac or Victor Hugo. These sources reported dutifully on Chevalier’s importance in the United States, telling French fans, as *Cinéa* did, that *Parade d’amour* had played for fourteen weeks at the exclusive Criterion cinema in New York, and that, in an America that prized speed and informality over everything else, the great star, to his admirers there, was simply “M. C.” But there was also, always, the understanding of Chevalier’s international importance, of his significance to a global community of movie fans. In Algiers, which seemed to have such a stake in affirming Chevalier’s Frenchness as a means of asserting that of the audiences that attended the major cinemas there, the star’s true status was fully understood. With the arrival of *Chanson de Paris* in North Africa, *Les
Chevalier and Dietrich wrote, simply, of the trajectory of Chevalier’s stardom: Paris, America, the world.39

Like Chevalier’s, Dietrich’s international celebrity worked as a sign of the global importance of the Hollywood company that employed the star, Paramount. When that studio ran an advertisement in the film weekly Hebdo to stress its importance in Europe, images from three films appeared, and films that showed different approaches to Paramount’s strategy for the continent: Rien que la vérité (1931), which Paramount produced in French at its Joinville studio and intended only for French-speaking audiences; Marius, which Marcel Pagnol co-produced through his own company and Paramount, and which the American studio distributed in France and Europe and also some selected venues in the United States; and Coeurs brûlés, the film that appeared first in the advertisement, with an image showing Dietrich and her costar Gary Cooper, and which played throughout the United States, Europe, and the rest of the world.40

These three films in the advertisement together show Paramount’s extensive industrial reach, in France, in Europe, and, in the case of Coeurs brûlés, to all of the countries where feature films might be seen. Typically, however, the emphasis in France fell on Dietrich’s status as an international star of particular significance there. That was how Cinéa understood her when the magazine used her German/American film career to discuss the potential of the French sound film; that was also how Saint-Cyr described L’Ange bleu in La Semaine à Paris, as a film unimaginable in any language other than German, but that, in its nontalking French version, attained international status. It was also apparent in the ads for the film in French tabloids, which gave Dietrich billing over the imposing Jannings, and identified her as the great global star, “l’extraordinaire vedette mondiale.”41

The French press took frequent pleasure in Dietrich’s friendships with such homegrown performers as Suzy Vernon, and delighted in the diva’s visits to sites of Parisian intellectual culture, for instance the office of the newspaper L’Intransigeant.42 Dietrich was so famous in France that journals taking no interest in film took an interest in her, in the manner of the professional journal L’Association Médicale, which in 1931 reviewed a new biography, La Vie brûlante de Marlène Dietrich, by Jean Lasserre. The capsule review touched upon the great star’s discovery by director Josef von Sternberg and her move to Hollywood, but then insisted that the real measure of the biography came in its coverage of Dietrich’s return to Europe and its speculation upon her future in Paris. According to Lasserre’s book, Dietrich’s stardom may have had its roots in America, but became notable for its full development in Europe broadly and the capital of France in particular.43
Over the course of her life and career, Dietrich almost certainly became much more associated first with Europe, because of her work there during World War II, and then with Paris, where she had lived for many years at the time of her death in 1992. The standard Dietrich historiography has it that her movie career declined after the disaster of her last film with Sternberg, *The Devil Is a Woman*, from 1935, and then revived after she refashioned her film persona in 1939 with *Destry Rides Again* for Universal, the less than prestigious Hollywood studio, but never regained the level of the early 1930s. This may just have been an American narrative, however, as Dietrich seems to have maintained a steady level of celebrity in France throughout the 1930s and 1940s, at least if we count as evidence her ongoing ubiquity in French film tabloids and other magazines from the period.

From World War II on, in France as well as the United States, Dietrich was as much defined by her voice as by her famous legs and figure, but in a fashion different from the era of her first sound films. During the war, with her adoption of the pacifist anthem “Lili Marlene,” Dietrich became one of the most recognizable voices—on radio and recordings—for Allied soldiers, and then she spent much of the rest of her career as a cabaret singer giving live performances, invoking her success as Lola Lola in *L’Ange bleu*. She remained an international celebrity, but her status as an international film star had changed considerably, and certainly lessened, over the last fifty years of her life.

Chevalier’s career changed even more quickly and dramatically than Dietrich’s. After *Folies Bergère* in 1935 the star left Hollywood, perhaps because of contractual disagreements with his last employer, MGM, and did not return for more than twenty years, when he worked with Billy Wilder in *Love in the Afternoon* (1957) and then Vincente Minnelli in *Gigi* (1958). Moreover the popular discussion about Chevalier in France in the mid- to late 1930s began to challenge both his international stardom as well as his status as a fully modern celebrity. In the film tabloid *Ciné France*, for instance, a 1937 gossip column full of short items announced that French tenor Georges Thill—nine years younger than Chevalier and representing a very different musical tradition, the opera—had arrived in Hollywood. As a means of celebrating Franco-American friendship, Thill sang “La Marseillaise,” and the column hailed his performance. The column then added, when “Maurice Chevalier comes to Hollywood,” even though the star seems not to have visited the United States anytime recently, “and for the same reasons sings ‘La Marseillaise’ . . . That’s an execution.” In this apparently humorous notice, the movie star had been replaced by the opera star, and precisely in terms of who might best represent the nation while moving beyond national boundaries.
Chevalier frequently appeared onstage in North Africa during this period, and in 1938, when he came to Algiers, where he had always been so popular, *Les Spectacles d’Alger* referred to him, as always, as “our great national performer.” The reviewer of Chevalier’s act went on to comment, almost sadly, that despite the star’s new repertoire, “he was obliged, at each show, to sing his old successes: ‘Ma Pomme,’ ‘Prosper,’ ‘Valentine,’ etc.”46 Just a few years removed from his successes in Hollywood, when he represented so many of the technological advances of cinema during the transition to sound, Chevalier—at least in Algiers—had turned into an icon of nostalgia seemingly forced to perform a familiar song list, a signifier for colonial audiences of the Parisian music hall of the 1920s and early 1930s rather than of the contemporary motion picture.

The timing of these shifts in Dietrich’s and Chevalier’s celebrity status makes it convenient to assume that, as soon as the transition to sound was complete and the use of sound in film had been fully standardized, movie stardom changed. It is important to point out, however, that stardom is not simply connected to, and determined by, film technology and production practices. Stardom itself is far too unpredictable. In just one example, by the end of World War II Chevalier’s own national celebrity in France was fragmented by ideological preferences rather than industrial developments. He had been accused of wartime collaboration with the Nazis; the apolitical Chevalier, suddenly unpopular in his native country, then found himself championed by the French Communist Party, which typically opposed the political agendas of the various French “Purge Committees” that investigated collaborative activity.47

There are nevertheless periods when technological determinants override others in the construction of stardom, and this was particularly the case during the transition to sound. The importance of the shift has entered into the mythology of cinema; the belief that John Gilbert’s unusually high voice, for instance, doomed the sound career of the silent film star. It seems undeniably true that the adoption of the new technology enabled the particular, international stardoms of Chevalier and Dietrich, among the first and most important such stars of the sound era. A close look at different periods of stardom, and at the various and sometimes overlapping levels of stardom—local, national, international—gives us a sense of how fans experienced movie celebrity, and also how that celebrity facilitated regional and global film distribution and exhibition. If sound represented a rupture for film companies in the United States and Europe, in terms of how films might be produced for international audiences, then Chevalier and Dietrich helped make possible the smooth functioning of a global industry while at the same time introducing audiences to new pleasures, based as much on the voice of the star as on the image.