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Sonja Henie, Norwegian Star in Hollywood

The title “Norwegian star in Hollywood” indicates what I’d like to enlighten in my presentation; Henie as a Hollywood made Star; which elements constructs her star persona? I will also elaborate *if or how* national identity is portrayed in her films, and the Norwegian response to this. But first I will give you a short outline of Henie’s career.

Sonja Henie was born in Oslo in 1912 and she died of leukaemia in 1969 – only 57 years old. According to the latest biography (Stenseth 2002) she had three careers in her relatively short life; first as a sports athlete from 1924 to 1936, second as a film star and entertainer from 1936 to 1960, and third as an art collector and keen lover of modern art the last nine years of her life. It is, of course, Henie’s second career as a film star and entertainer that we shall pay attention here, and especially her twelve years (starting in 1936) in the film industry.

In 1936, Sonja Henie won her third Olympic Gold Medal and her tenth World Championship in a row in figure skating. She was 24 and world famous. Henie decided it was time to give up her sports career and pursue a career as a film actress. The strategy behind this change was put together with the help of her father Wilhelm who until his death in 1937 was his daughter’s manager. After her success at the Olympics in Garmisch Partenkirchen and the World Championships in Paris, Henie travelled to USA. Here, she set out on a tour across America, giving figure skating shows to packed audiences. Last stop on the tour was Los Angeles where she arranged two performances at the Polar Palace Ice Rink. Henie and her father invited many well-known persons from Hollywood’s film community and obtained broad press coverage, partly due to the support from the famous couple William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies. The performances were a great success, and Henie became the talk of the town almost overnight. This happened in the midst of the Hollywood studio era. The studio 20th Century Fox contacted her, and after some tough negotiating with studio manager Darryl F. Zanuck, she signed a five-year contract. Through this contract, Henie was to be launched in a leading role, receive USD 70,000 per film and it allowed her to continue her skating exhibitions between the recording

periods. During the years from 1936 to 1948 she starred in eleven films, mainly musical comedies, in which the first nine of them were produced by 20th Century Fox. In the next years she negotiated her contract with the studio twice, and in 1940 she was to receive 125 000 dollars per film. In the late 1930s, she was in Hollywood's top ten list of most popular stars and America had become "ice-minded" to use a phrase from her autobiography published in 1938 "Wings on my Feet".

In Henie's case it is also important to bear in mind that it was her skills in figure skating that made her famous worldwide, it opened the doors to her second career and formed the basis for her star persona. Figure skating continues to be the central core in her star persona through out her film career and her life, for that matter. It is also important to be aware of the context that contributed to the increasing popularity of figure skating in this period. Figure skating fitted a new feminine ideal as hand in glove; the healthy, modern and physically active woman emerges during the 1920's, a shift from the fragile bourgeoisie feminine ideal. A fine balance between different gender norms; not too masculine, no trace of visible muscles, for example.

Figure skating confirms femininity and enhances beauty and grace, at the same time it disguises the challenging and demanding physical aspects of the sport. This made it easy for Hollywood to accept figure skating as a new form of entertainment, and it made the transition from sport star to film star possible for Henie. There are few examples of this kind of shift for female Hollywood stars (the only parallel is the water ballet represented by Esther Williams, but it was Henie's success who paved the way for this MGM star. To counter the box office successes of 20th Century Fox, MGM replaced the figure skating with synchronised swimming and they found their own Henie in the former competitive swimmer. To understand the fresh and radical nature of figure skating in the 20's and 30's, it can be compared to snowboard or other types of extreme sport in our time.

What is a star? As many have pointed out, a star must consist of both ordinariness and something extra ordinary. The ordinary serves as a point of identification; it makes her one of us so to speak, as the extra ordinary makes her stand out from the crowd and legitimises her as star. Stars emerge as picture personalities in Hollywood's silent era, and they are increased as studio trademarks in relation to the studio system. The analytical approach to stars as cultural images is developed during the 70's in relation to studies of stars from Hollywood, but these theories can apply for other contexts as well.

Richard Dyer was one of the first to stress that a star is not only constructed through the on-screen appearances, but also off screen. Besides actual films, different types of public material are very important in how a star is constructed; PR-material from the studio, general publicity and criticism and commentaries are the types that Dyer singles out. Barry King takes Dyer a step further when he says that The Stars Persona is the intersection of discursive practises in an effort to realise a coherent subjectivity of the actual person and the roles played on screen. He also underlines hierarchic system of different approaches to acting; a star can either *impersonate* her characters (which is considered good acting), or merely play “*her self*” in which the latter has negative connotations. King stresses that the choice of approach has no direct influence on their status as stars, or popularity in the general public - many great stars are considered bad actors, and this is also the case for Henie.

As mentioned earlier, Henie played mainly in musical comedies. Greg Faller has developed different models for levels of screen activity in musicals; The musical genre differs from other film genres, in that the star must function on two levels; The story, in which the star acts, playing a character, and the show – the musical number – where the star shifts from acting to performing, and therefore becomes a performer.

Henie’s debut film *One in a Million* had several semi-biographical elements, which helped transform Henie from sports star to film star in the consciousness of the public. The film was a light romantic farce with the qualities of a musical, and it formed a sort of basic recipe that would be repeated in most of her films. The success of the film stemmed from the extravagant figure skating scenes. Both *One in a Million* and her next film *Thin Ice* (1937), was set in Switzerland and Henie’s characters were given Swiss identities named Greta and Lili. This led to reactions from the Norwegian public, and Henie convinced the studio to locate her next picture in Norway – or in Hollywood’s version of Norway, at least. I’m now going to show you a scene from Henie’s third film *Happy Landing*. We are going to see the first musical number called the Snow Maiden Ballet. It takes place in a small Norwegian mountain town called Nordenscholde where the American night club entertainer and womaniser Duke Sargent (played by Cesae Romero) and his agent and friend Jimmy Hall (played by Don Ameche) have made an emergency landing during a snow storm with their small aeroplane on a publicity flight to Paris. In Nordenscholde is the annual winter carnival taking place. Henie plays the young girl Trudy Erichsen, whose father is eager to get Trudy married to the local boy Olaf – the proud owner of 41 cows. In this village it

is tradition that if a man ask a girl to dance with him twice, it is the same as propose a marriage to her – Duke Sargent is of course unaware of this rather strange ritual.

Happy Landing had premiere in 1938, in January in the US and in August in Norway, and it marks a major peak in Henie's career – this film was her biggest success besides 1941 *Sun Valley Serenade*. The film made new box office records, and she climbed from number 8 to no 3 on Hollywood's top ten list of the most popular stars (only Shirley Temple and Cary Grant beats her on that list for 1938). This is also in many respects a typical example of a Henie-film. Prior to her Hollywood debut, Henie's only film experience was a small supporting role in the Norwegian film *Seven Days for Elisabeth* (1927). This lack of experience as an actress was compensated for by giving her a simple role with easy lines and surrounding her with the studio's biggest stars. In *Happy Landing*, Henie is supported by some of the most prominent 20th Century's stars, like Jean Hersholt, Don Ameche, Cesar Romero and Ethel Merman. The problem of Henie's Norwegian accent was solved by giving the films a European setting, or by giving Henie the role of a refugee or immigrant.

However, the unique feature of Henie's stardom was her physical skills, which made the traditional romantic union of musicals difficult. In *Happy Landing* we witness union by proxy, namely the romantic union between the snowman and the snowmaiden. Her films often end with a scene with Henie on the ice alone, elevated and divine. One reason for this was, of course, that it was hard to find a male partner who could match Henie's skating skills. The radical nature of this was toned down by making her character seem childlike. In appearance, Henie had a striking resemblance to Shirley Temple (also a 20th Century Fox-star) and in her films she often portrayed young girls who were referred to and talked to as if they were children. This contradictory star-image, which consist both the naive child and the divine goddess, is made possible through the two levels of the film musical, and the tension between narrative and number. In the film musicals narrative, the childlike, ordinary aspect of her is emphasized along with romantic union, and in the numbers she is transformed into the extra-ordinary elevated solo-performer.

This constructs a Star Persona who fails to grasp a coherent subjectivity, with reference to Barry King. Instead Henie's star persona is characterised trough an ongoing battle between seemingly mutual exclusive oppositional elements. This paves the way for very different interpretations of Henie as a public figure in the US and as we shall see, in Norway. The difference is enhanced by

the fact that Henie, in parallel with her film career, toured all over America with her ice shows, and these shows functioned to reinforce her popularity. Henie took the skating routines from her films and repeated them in her performances in the “Ice Revue”. This cross promotion armoured the films performance level, and overshadowed the aspects of her persona linked to the films narrative level. In America, the elements associated with Henie as Star circulated through different types of press coverage, emphasises her as the professional peerless skater. This is linked to Royalty, in titling her as Ice princess and Queen of Ice. Secondary star images are her lacking of success in love, her wealth and extravagant lifestyle due to her success as Business woman. There is no trace, no circulation of the childlike aspects from the films narrative level in other media.

Besides making a plausible setting for Henie’s Scandinavian accent, the films European setting also serves other functions. The European setting corresponds to the childlike aspects of Henie’s roles, making her naive attitude a part of a general “Europeanness”. The films are positive in their approach towards Europeans, or “europeanness”, but with a distance that results in an apparent alienation. This is reflected in the bizarre customs and rituals of the inhabitants of medieval looking mountain villages, dressed in strange folk costumes (Hollywood’s versions of either German lederhosen or the Norwegian bunad – with glitter and silk stockings) accompanied by a long line of weird but well meaning, naïve supporting characters with large moustaches, or over the top facial expressions. Europe is also portrayed with a close connection to body and nature, and of course winter in particular. Christian Viviani has described this as comic irony, which is typical for Hollywood’s attitude towards Europe from the early 1930’s. But this stressing of difference also paves the way for comic tension between the American familiar “us” and the European unknown “others” which serves the musical comedy well.

What was the Norwegian response to Henie as film star and Hollywood’s interpretation of Norway? Henie didn’t give any skating performances in Norway between 1935 and 1953, so no cross promotion between ice shows and films took place, and we had no skating tours to help reinforce the films ice skating routines. Surely, Henie visited Norway annually until Second World War, and participated in promotional events like film premières or sporting events, but in Norway, it is the construction made through the films, that form the basis of her Star persona. This may be one explanation for the strong emphasis of the childish aspects in her persona in Norway, unlike the case in the US. This childlike quality is closely linked to her extra ordinary skating skills, and this again connects her with the fresh and natural, her youth and beauty – in

other words ultimately *Norwegian virtues*. In Norway it seems, that Henie's success in America is possible because she is the bearer of typical Norwegian attributes. This maybe a plausible reason for the Norwegian media's enthusiastic determination to excuse, explain and negotiate the "non-Norwegian" elements in her star persona, such as extravagance and wealth, or having a turbulent love life. The function of Henie's star persona in Norway fits Benedict Anderson thesis of national identity as imagined community: An imagined community is different from an actual community because it is not - and cannot be - based on face-to-face interaction between its members. Instead, members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity and common virtues. In this process the media plays a crucial role.

After 1985 Henie's star persona changed radically, when the biography *Queen of Ice, Queen of Shadows* co-written by her brother Leif was published. The revelations of alcoholism, paranoia, selfishness, vulgarity, flirting with Nazism and so on, are dominant facets of her star image to day. However they did not circulate through the media during her life. Quite contrary; in the late 1930's Henie served as an agent for an imagined healthy, fresh, natural and sports loving Norwegian identity.

Sonja Henie's American films:

One in a Million (1936); Thin Ice, Happy Landing (1937); My Lucky Star (1938); Second Fiddle, Everything Happens at Night (1939); Sun Valley Serenade (1941); Iceland (1942); Wintertime (1943); It's a Pleasure (1944/45); The Countess of Monte Cristo (1948)

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