‘The almost perfect Anglo-Saxon type, more English than the English’: Vilma Bánky’s star image in 1920s America

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ABSTRACT

The early 1920s witnessed a spike of interest in the import of European stars to Hollywood, as the film studios hired talent scouts to keep a constant watch on successful stage and film actors on the continent. Vilma Bánky’s Hollywood career began when she was signed to Samuel Goldwyn’s film studio in 1925. This paper analyses the characteristics of Bánky’s star image, particularly in relation to her conspicuously white features and the story of her discovery, which successfully located her within the Cinderella narrative. To the movie going public, Bánky achieved stardom through being discovered by a film producer rather than through conscious efforts, thus, her story was encoded as a patriarchal text that denied her any form of agency. Bánky’s star publicity suggested she incarnated the highest ideals of whiteness; her gentle way of being and feminine charm was a natural extension of her physical attributes. Fan magazines propagated the concept of perfect white womanhood by emphasising tranquility, elegance and grace as characteristics inherent to her persona. ‘Miss Banky’s charm is a subtle, winsome appeal which one associates inevitably with the truly feminine,’ declared one columnist writing for Picture Play. The fan discourse also showed Bánky as an eager subject of Americanisation, as an actress who owed her ‘lucky break’ not only to her producer, but an individual in debt to transformative power of America at large.

The early 1920s witnessed a spike of interest in the import of European stars to Hollywood. The vogue started with the arrival of Pola Negri – signed to work for Paramount in 1922 with her German director, Ernst Lubitsch – was followed by other continental acquisitions, such as the otherworldly Scandinavians Greta Nissen and Greta Garbo. Vincendeau and Philips (2006, 7) observed how the film studios started to hire talent scouts to keep a constant watch on successful stage and film actors on the continent. It was in that cultural landscape that Vilma Bánky, a young Hungarian actress, signed a contract with Samuel Goldwyn, an independent producer, in March 1925. In introducing Bánky to American audiences, Goldwyn’s publicity department fabricated a highly sentimentalised narrative of discovery, which emphasised fate and luck. This paper analyses how fan magazines shaped Bánky’s image by placing her within the Cinderella narrative, identifying the most crucial

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components of her star phenomenon. It also explores the ideological value of Bánky as an epitome of passive femininity, a flawless vision of womanhood underlined through aesthetic means by her conspicuously pale or white features. The notion of female perfection, closely aligned with whiteness, found its most active shape in the description of her appeal in film magazines, as exemplified by a letter written by one of her fans: ‘The beauty among beauties is Vilma Bánky (...) Of a sweet and shy disposition, Vilma is in every sense an ideal woman’ (The Extra Boy 1927, 119).

Gaines (1986, 20) suggested that stars have prominence in the social realm and their significance cannot be limited solely to the film industry; through shaping and representing diverse imaginings of what it means to be a white woman in America, female stardom could illustrate the distortions of cultural reality. In her monograph Off-White Hollywood, Negra (2001, 24) established what she calls a multidisciplinary framework in studying star texts: a method drawing ‘from the fields of film studies, women’s studies, American studies and critical ethnic studies.’ Whilst the methodology adopted here largely mirrors Negra’s, it also builds on post-colonial theory, fan studies and evaluations of fan magazines in the 1910s and 1920s, authored by Studlar (1995, 2004, 2013), Stamp (2000) and Morey (2002), amongst other feminist film scholars.

The Cinderella myth in the early star system

In the mid-1920s the film studios became more interested in the import of European émigrés, competing with each other to sign the best foreign actors who they would then introduce, re-packaged, to the new American market. Higson and Maltby (1999, 13) point out that the policy of acquiring raw European talent worked on many levels, not only appropriating the attractions of Europe within the American market but also through selling productions back to Europeans. Such exchange had its roots in the cultural notions of Europe as the old continent, a place of refinement and tradition. Ramirez (2010, 71) demonstrates that European sensibility, with its connotations of high society and theatre, was of special appeal to the American audience in the 1920s.

These trends in the film industry were paralleled by the wider change in outlook on immigration. Whereas the trope of American egocentrism can be traced back well into the nineteenth century (Staiger 1992, 127), it was the roaring twenties that created a political climate in which fears associated with foreign influence could prosper. An intensification of American nationalism after 1918 was a direct response to the upswing of European revolutions; as a consequence, domestic national identity was constructed against potentially dangerous foreigners (Hunt 1987, 16). In assuming a correlation between white skin and supposedly superior inner qualities, the mainstream debate favoured white immigrants over Native Americans or People of Colour (Jacobson 1998, 9), seeing the former as more likely to adopt to the white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant way of living, considered the most desirable lifestyle. Such notions built on the prevalent forms of knowledge articulated in ‘The Age of Imperialism’ of the late nineteenth century, when increasing social Darwinism – as well as arguments put forward by philosopher John Fiske – saw Anglo-Saxons as morally superior to other ethnic groups. Within the context of America’s racialised discourse, Studlar (2004, 299) notes, ethnicity was considered a determining factor in the successful process of assimilation.

In her discussion of the Cinderella myth and its relationship to early cinema, Anselmo-Sequeira (2014, 175) points out that by the late 1910s the fantasy of metamorphosis governed
the American screen. The narrative of female stardom and magic transmutation was just one of numerous developments transplanted to cinema from the stage; it became a powerful story in which the tutelage of the motion picture moguls substituted for the ‘happily ever after’ with a prince (Anselmo-Sequeira 2014, 179). The star system repackaged its female stars as everyday Cinderellas who were given their chance due to the transformative action of a male producer. In 1918, Photoplay wrote of ‘Cinderella (…) girls who (…) became famous overnight when their good fairies led them into the magic light of the Kliegs’ (Shorey 1918, 47). The tale of Cinderella was incorporated into the lives of many movie stars of the 1920s, forming a base for the biographies of such prominent actors as Mary Pickford, Mabel Normand, Coleen Moore and Clara Bow (Orgeron 2003, 87). On one level, such success stories were aligned with the format of the film periodicals, which often invited women to participate in beauty contests and commercial searchers for new, shining stars of the screen (Orgeron 2009, 16); activities that extended the promise of a Cinderella-like transformation to their readership. Less directly, magazines appealed to the fantasies of change in offering advice on how to emulate screen idols through adequate fashions and beauty regimens.

An anecdote concerning the first meeting between Bánky and Goldwyn, as circulated in a variety of film periodicals, carefully played out this Cinderella scenario. In the early months of 1925 Samuel Goldwyn embarked on a search for his own version of Greta Garbo, who had recently been brought to America by his business rival, Louis B. Mayer (Schildgen 2010, 43). It was during that journey from Berlin to Budapest that the producer met Vilma Bánky, ‘one of the most noted beauties in Central Europe’ (York 1925, 41), and asked her to join his stock of stars. Aileen St. John-Brennan, a popular gossip columnist, wrote about the encounter in 1928, suggesting that Vilma’s ‘type’ and potential was immediately recognisable: ‘Mr. Goldwyn saw her in Europe, decided that her type of romantic beauty expressed the perfect embodiment of wholesome womanhood, and persuaded her to sign her name on a dotted line’ (St. John-Brennon 1928, 52). According to Goldwyn, he saw a postcard depicting Bánky whilst strolling through the Hungarian city of Pest (now part of Budapest) and, being struck by the star potential of the young, fair-haired woman, became determined to contact her (Schildgen 2010, 48). Such recounting – almost without a doubt a narrative created by Goldwyn’s publicity department – demonstrates how white, female Europeananness could function as a commodified, saleable form of heritage in American context. After days of fruitless searching, Goldwyn’s efforts to find Bánky eventually reached the actress; she then managed to arrange a dinner with the producer, just hours before he was destined to board a train and leave the country for good.

Slide (2010, 73) has described the relationship of dependence between fan magazines and the studio moguls in charge of star images, writing that journalists ‘published and wrote what the studios determined they should publish and write’. A reliance of this kind was inscribed in such film publications since their conception, as they came to existence in the early teens to support the promotion of the film industry, still nascent at the time. The format reached the apex of its popularity in the early 1920s, when the circulation of Motion Picture Magazine alone exceeded 400,000 copies a month. Picture Play could boast half of that figure (Koszarski 1994, 193). Clearly oriented towards female readership, film periodicals combined film reviews and star gossip with the coverage of the newest fashions and advertising for beauty products, ranging from hair dye to freckle removing creams. Continuing to work in close allegiance with the film executives, who supplied such publications with studio-sanctioned gossip, constituted the most crucial avenue through which...
Star personae were commodified for wide circulation. As such, they are incredibly useful resources for film scholars and historians alike, as such magazines illustrate the promotional discourse on movie performers, whilst also offering the ideological backdrop against which these stars were constructed. Studlar (1995, 277) discusses how, in their commentary on the relationship of stars, fan magazines aligned themselves with patriarchal models of female subjectivity, encouraging conventional notions about femininity and marriage.

In his critical evaluation of Cinderella as a literary trope, Baum (2000, 69–70) asserts that ‘what we worship in her is not what she is but what she gets; by subscribing to the myth of Cinderella, we sustain our collective female belief in wealth, beauty, and revenge’. Indeed, the parable is useful in demonstrating the potential of all females, no matter how disadvantaged, to be successful in life. It is a vision where obstacles can be overcome by a higher power and magical patronage. For Baum, the bewildering persistence of the tale has significance as a projection of possibility, not as an example of how to navigate the world in order to succeed, because Cinderella’s agency is absent. If one accepts the validity of this view, one can start to unpack Bánky in parallel terms, as a mere pawn in the game of fortune rather than a driven individual in charge of her own career. Notably, fan press portrayed Bánky as a girl lucky enough to be saved from her dull livelihood by a perceptive producer. In equating the star with a waiting-to-be-found gem, the Cinderella narrative reduced her own sense of influence and agency and romanticised what was primarily an economic and cultural appropriation of the attractions of Europe by the American film industry.

Although framed mainly in positive terms, Bánky’s lucky break was, supposedly, revealing of the unfair rules that governed the movie acting business. In that respect, it attracted a degree of minor criticism that can be linked to the fact she was a movie player of foreign origin. For Tamar Lane,

There have been many picture celebrities who have ridden to fame on mad luck, but Vilma Banky takes the Grand Prix, the Futurity Sweepstakes and the Kentucky Derby for getting all the breaks in her favour. (Lane 1926, 59)

Lane’s article reported that in granting a starring role to a virtually unknown young actress, the studio system denied the same opportunities to other equally talented – and perhaps more experienced – individuals. She lamented that, in ‘her very first entries, and in the course of a few months’, Bánky was presented to the public alongside Ronald Colman and Rudolph Valentino, a stellar cast that most aspiring actresses could only dream of. This type of outlook was not only a reflection on the inner-workings of the star system, but also an indication of xenophobic sentiments prevalent in popular culture. In the late 1920s, when the vogue for foreign (white) stars was on its wane, fan magazines started to mock the demand for émigrés, asking, if only hypothetically, if native-born stars are not good enough for the American public. The film industry was, according to Picture Play, much more accommodating when it came to non-Americans: ‘Nobody heard of a foreigner treading the extra’s weary path. Only the home-grown product was trampled – and by the alien’ (Gebhart 1928, 29).

Much about Bánky’s ascent to prominence positioned her in reference to foreign stars of established international fame who – in the words of Picture Play – arrived in Hollywood with ‘regal manner and queenly condescension’. Bánky, in contrast, held no assumptions or great expectations of success, coming not as a silent film diva but as ‘a scared young girl on her first journey from home’ with an intention to humbly beg favour (Gebhart 1926, 34). Writing for Motion Picture Magazine, Manners (1928, 78) referred to Bánky as ‘merely
a girl who is forced into the show, who – unlike ‘the show girl’ Negri –, does not crave attention. (Indeed, fan discourse at large emphasised the notion of passivity as inherent to the performer’s career trajectory). What transpires from Photoplay’s account of Bánky’s childhood, for instance, is that she had been raised in accordance with Victorian ethics, engaging in the traditionally feminine, artistic pursuits, and that she was never particularly passionate about neither stage nor screen acting. According to the common lore, she was forced into the movies by the poor economic standing of her family, as a result of the aftermath of the Great War:

She grew up, as is the custom even in Hungary, and outside of a love of books and music she had no particular urge in life. The family was well fixed and Vilma was beautiful. So why worry? She would never have to do so except for the war. (...) When it was over Vilma was faced with the problem of working or not eating. And she liked to eat. But no girl with a face like Vilma’s can really starve. She met Bella Balagh who is a Hungarian movie director. He put her before the camera. His productions called her to the attention of UFA who put her under contract to work for them in Berlin and Budapest. Enter now upon the scene Mr. Samuel Goldwyn of Hollywood U.S.A. (York 1926b, 82)

In the fairy tale, Cinderella is born into higher class, only to fall into deprivation because of the death of her caring parents. The notion of aristocratic heritage, defined as an internal quality that moves one beyond the realm of ordinary (rather than simply a matter of financial standing) can be understood as one of the most vital characteristics of the heroine. The vision of romanticised Old World royalty, and the parallel narrative of personal loss, has been used to create Bánky’s star mythology. In other words, the sense that Bánky was somehow demoted to a lower status in Europe – her family allegedly lost all their wealth during the Great War – just to be restored to her rightful position in Hollywood, constitutes another point of conflation between the imperialist narrative and the Cinderella story (Anselmo-Sequeira 2014, 180). This dramatic formula, however, was easily applied to other star images, constituting a main avenue through which American audiences encountered the fantasy of nobility.

According to the press accounts, Bánky’s father was a high-ranking official working for Franz Joseph, the king of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Her nearly regal upbringing was an entirely fictitious tale endorsed by the studio which employed her. In fact, Rachel Schildgen points out that the details regarding Bánky’s personal background were reshuffled and reinvented by the studio so many times that the facts still prove difficult to rediscover. Picture Play worked to establish Goldwyn’s new star as a ‘mass-marketed rendition’ (Anselmo-Sequeira 2014, 169) of a fairy-tale princess by providing their readership with a biographical note on Bánky’s childhood:

As her father was a prominent politician, to their home came dignitaries of the government to discuss weighty problems, officials resplendent on state occasions with much gold braid. The social life that moved sedately about her would offer the charm of an old pride to is of the world born but yesterday [sic]. To the young dreamer Vilma, stirred by an impulse to get out and achieve, it seemed at times frightfully dull and stodgy. Grounded from her infancy in that old civilization. surrounded by still magnificent relics of its grandeur, palaces and museums full of antiquities, galleries with pieces centuries old, she absorbed art and culture un-consciously – and longed to get away from it all into a busier life where one did things instead of musing over the archives of the past. (Gebhart 1926, 34)

What marks this nostalgic vision of Bánky’s past is its reliance on the idea of high society as refined, but inherently old-fashioned and resistant to progress. This feature portrayed a
society constructed in opposition to the dynamism of American culture, which compensates its lack of sophistication by providing constant opportunities for personal growth. It paints Europe as a world that, to use Said’s terminology, is ‘synonymous with stability and unchanging eternality’ (1995, 240) whilst simultaneously foreshadowing the promise of the New World. Hence, in attributing young Bánky with longing for something else than ‘archives of the past’ it gives her a sense of agency, usually absent from the majority of press accounts. Most importantly though, such scenarios served an ideological role supportive of imperialism by highlighting the potential offered by America, the beacon of modernity, for all driven individuals. Gebhart (1926, 34) painted a similar, albeit more idolising picture in *Photoplay*, explaining how Bánky could have dreamt ‘of gold-carpeted America as the place where all things were possible because people worked and made them so’ all through her childhood years. ‘Glamorous stories had come across the ocean to set little melodies aquiver in her heart. Ach, if only she had wings to fly to that wonderful America!’

Furthermore, lying at the core of Bánky’s story is the cultural appropriation and subsequent commodification of ‘raw talent’ by American producers. As such, the tale articulates ideals consistent with American imperialism (Negra 2001, 60). Negra follows Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease in extending the definition of imperial power from external ideological struggles to internal processes that reflect on the power of the country in the domestic setting (Kaplan 1993, 60). The views expressed by Mrs. Walter Adams in her letter to *Photoplay* encapsulated the essence of this tactic, celebrating America as a global power. Writing about the most recent deluge of criticism aimed at foreign actors, she reasoned:

> So many people are saying such catty things about the foreign players coming over here. It isn’t the spirit of the U. S. A. at all to be that way. It just makes us prouder of our country to know it gives better opportunities than other countries, and what do we lose? Nothing! (Adams 1926, 12)

Cinderella mythology gains special currency in conjunction with nationalism, as it exposes practical conventions that represent Hollywood, and America, on a broader scale, as a place where people from all over the world are given the opportunity to reach their full potential. Symbolically, foreign players provided a unique opportunity for appraisal of the absorptive capacities of America.

**White femininity**

Bánky’s star coverage propagated the concept of perfect white womanhood by emphasising tranquillity, elegance and grace as characteristics inherent to her persona. ‘Miss Banky’s charm is a subtle, winsome appeal which one associates inevitably with the truly feminine’, declared one columnist writing for *Picture Play* (St. John-Brenon 1927, 61). The chief editor of *Motion Picture Classic* spoke of Bánky in similar terms, describing her as ‘a gentle type of femininity’ who ‘has a soft, sweet voice, a pleasant smile and a winsome personality. She is distinctly feminine, rather quiet and vivacious, and subdued rather than demonstrative’ (Brewster 1926a, 72). Scott Fitzgerald – arguably one of the most famous chroniclers of the jazz age – maintained Bánky was a true representation of femininity. She incarnated a nearly Victorian ideal of female behaviour constructed as an effective counter-image to the modern woman, the flapper. ‘Soft and gentle and gracious and sweet’, he proclaimed, ‘all the lacy adjectives apply to her. This type is reticent and unassuming – but just notice the quality of orchids on her shoulder as she precedes her reverential escort into the theatre’ (Reid 1927,
Although it is not done explicitly, all these accounts share a common denominator, lauding Bánky as representative of the highest standards of a universally appealing humanity. These discursive remarks went hand in hand with descriptions of Bánky’s physical appearance. Arguably, films shot in black and white cannot bring out the contrast between certain hair colours as distinctly as colour photography, so the audiences had to gain their understanding of star features through other, non-cinematic sources; hence, articles did not fall short from reminding their target readers who is fair-haired and who is not in Hollywood: ‘It seems, too, to have been a season for blondes, when one considers a spotlight of interest that has been cast upon such golden-haired personalities as Vilma Banky, Norma Shearer, etc’ (Balch 1926, 77). Bánky’s blue eyes that, as reported by Photoplay, ‘could melt a heart of steel’ (Brown 1926, 113) were potent signifiers of radiant beauty and spiritual virtue. Moreover, the notorious emphasis on physical attractiveness exacerbated passivity in the career of the star, placing looks over acting craft. It is therefore telling that Bánky is never referred to in relation to her talents, but, rather, in the context of her appearance and modest demeanour.

Due to their nature as multimedia artefacts, Photoplay and other periodicals embraced the ideological meanings of their pieces through illustrative content; colourful magazine covers served as powerful tools in highlighting ethnic symbolism linked to individual stars (Figure 1). Dyer (1997, 45) has shown how, according to Western racial discourse, whiteness is not an ethnicity but, rather, a lack of it; it is a nought that has to be brought forward in juxtaposition to darkness because ‘being white is simply being human.’ Dyer’s (1997, 71) work has also illuminated the ways in which lighter, paler skin is synonymous with beauty, especially in women; indeed, as he notes, the gallant term for women, ‘the fair sex’, implies a distinct skin colour. The way in which fan discourse framed Bánky’s beauty as a universal feminine ideal – rather than an example of a specific ethnic type – exposes the ideological imperatives of the West, with its pragmatic assumption that whiteness represents a superior way of being. Indeed, one of Picture Play’s features identified Bánky’s physiognomy as ’cosmopolitan’ and not indicative of any specific nationality (Schallert and Schallert 1927, 64), whilst Photoplay considered her to be ‘the almost perfect Anglo-Saxon type’, whose beauty registers as English in front of the camera, despite her Hungarian heritage (‘Picture of Vilma’ 1928, 23). The latter mention capitalises on the highly positive connotations of the English as residing at the top of the international hierarchy of whiteness, one of the ‘whitest’ ethnic groups, superseded only – if 1920s racial debate is to be relied on – by the perfect whiteness of the Nordic races.

Seen through the racial myopia of the era, Bánky was presented as a delicate woman of grace, refinement and last, but not least, modesty. This narrative tendency comes as no surprise, given a long-standing iconographic tradition of the West that associates female beauty with moral virtue. By inscribing Bánky’s bodily capital with visible aspects of whiteness – such as blonde hair and blue eyes – the star system encouraged a positive view of the star as a woman who was the ‘transparent and spiritual kind that should bring a new note of refinement, (...) very gracious and composed’ (Schallert and Schallert 1925, 72). Restraint, assigned so frequently to Bánky’s off-screen demeanour, is – as Carter (2007, 40) asserts – a part of the normative web of ideas related to whiteness, constructed as both ‘natural’ and a result of constant self-control. The symbolic connotations of the colour white, such as purity, spirituality, transcendence and simplicity, constructed a frame that supported the construction of Bánky within the star system.
The privileged place of whiteness in Western ideology comes at a price: to be truly white is to be ‘clean’ both physically and metaphorically, to be ‘pure’ and ‘innocent’; these qualities prove increasingly hard to sustain within public discourse, given the context of modernity and its liberalisation of sexual norms. Again, Dyer details how the lure of the white ideal is haunted by anxiety linked to the contamination caused by the outside world (Dyer 1997, 76). The idea of Bánky as representative of racial and sexual innocence is evident in the letter
written by a fan to *Photoplay* at the dawn of her popularity. Noting what they perceived as the increasing presence of sex on American screens, the author expressed his worry over the future of one of his favourite screen players:

Vilma Bánky will rise to great heights if they do not spoil her. She has beauty and refinement, combined with perfect technique. It is extremely unpleasant to contemplate what they might make her into: an over-marvelled, over made-up unnatural puppet. (Brownridge 1926, 12)

The letter mobilises the contrast between the idealised version of femininity and visibly constructed representations of womanhood, operating on the assumption that Hollywood’s commercial product is essentially based on a degree of artificiality that can somehow stain the perfect reputation of its leading stars. The fan goes on to suggests that the popular commercial tactic of using eroticism to sell films is as despicable as it is unnecessary, given the financial success achieved by *The Dark Angel*, an allegedly sexless film. ‘Those who claim the public demands sex plays are wrong, ’ she concludes (Brownridge 1926, 12). The fan press helped to sketch the contours of Bánky’s persona for moviegoers in aligning the actress with discourses of authenticity. Professing his admiration for an ‘almost extinct charm of the lady’, *Photoplay’s* journalist successfully juxtaposed Bánky to ‘celluloid counterfeit so common to Hollywood’ (Howe 1925, 98), as he termed the majority of female film players. Again, the strategy that underpins these texts echoes the cultural understanding of whiteness where, to maintain its illusion of superiority, it has to be presented as natural and not performed.

The writers of *Photoplay* regularly compared Bánky to Pola Negri, either to dwell on the potential rivalry between the two – Bánky played Valentino’s lover in *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) at the time when he was rumoured to be engaged to Negri – or to explore their contrasting ethnic images.2 York (1926a, 94) employed Bánky as the edifice of natural beauty, writing that she regularly attended dinner parties ‘without any vestige of lipstick, rouge, mascara, and only a light dusting powder to prevent shine’. In abstaining from artifice, she provided a visual alternative to the look favoured by Negri, a star known for her penchant for heavy makeup. In fact, the connection between whiteness and naturalness is made explicit through the assertion that ‘no-makeup off-stage’ is a look that can be sported, to startling results, specifically by blonde women. The article elevates white female sexuality in relationship to off-white sexuality, assuming that Bánky represents inaccessible perfection, a ‘sublime object of desire’, as opposed to the ‘accessible, material means of attaining carnal satisfaction’ connoted by Negri’s signature, highly sexualised look (Dandridge and Conrad 2001, 201). These dynamics were elucidated in the discourse of the late 1920s by referring to Negri as the former love interest of Bánky’s husband, Rod La Rocque:

Before Rod La Rocque met and married Vilma Banky, the only other lady with whom his name had been linked seriously was Pola Negri. Now, I ask you! Outside of the fact that Rod seems to prefer foreign attraction, you couldn’t say there was any point of similarity between these two. Where Pola is the vivid, scarlet flame, Vilma is the soft candle-light. One is dark. The other is light. One is the woman of the world. The other is a girl who might have been merely a wife if circumstances haven’t [sic] made a movie star out of her. Pola’s face is chalky-white and her eyes are black pools of both expression and make-up. Vilma seldom bothers to dust her lovely nose with powder. Pola can’t play unless she can hold the centre of the stage. Vilma timidly seeks quiet corners. (Manners 1928, 78)

Here, the juxtaposition between Bánky and Negri extends beyond the visual terms, incorporating everything they stand for, their temperaments, different outlooks, and even the sense of agency they exerted over their consecutive rises to the Hollywood pantheon. The pictorial
elements of the magazine are not engaged here, as the comparison is limited to purely to
the written content, as opposed to being supported through the inclusion of a photograph.

Other gossip surrounding Bánky described her as a reason for jealousy on the part of
Negri. In August 1926 *Motion Picture Classic* claimed that the Polish star did not feel con-
fident knowing Valentino had to hold Bánky in his arms, even if it was only a part of his
professional endeavour.

Pola Negri was looking at some of the stills showing Valentino making violent love to Vilma
Bánky in *The Son of the Sheik*. ‘Ah! exclamed Pola. ‘He make [sic] love to Vilma but all the
time he think [sic] of me!’ In spite of the reports to the contrary I think I can safely say that
there is not and never has been any romance between Vilma Banky and Rudolph Valentino.

(...)

Yet, even within those narratives, Bánky is constructed as an antithesis of the seductive.
In fact, contemporaneous fan magazines contain no suggestion of anything other than
friendship between the leading stars of *The Son of the Sheik*. In keeping with the image
of innocence ascribed to her persona, there is an aura of otherworldliness, an escalation
beyond matters of sex in her conduct. The lack of interest in romance fed into the image of
Bánky as representative of perfect womanhood; the purity she connoted was no match for
the highly sexualized Valentino.

The visual layer of *The Son of Sheik*, as well as promotional materials surrounding the
picture, contrasted Bánky with the ethnic representation of her leading man. Traditionally,
technological developments embraced by Hollywood filmmakers drew on aesthetic appa-
ratus to render white women as idealised beings, permeated by an otherworldly glow; Dyer (1997, 122) notes how the technique of backlighting ensures that blonde hair looked
blonde on celluloid, producing the image of ‘effulgent dazzle.’ In the film’s rape-seduction
scene, the arrangement of light and dark, transparency and substance, full blown sexuality
and sexual indifference, is used to bring Bánky’s delicate, white femininity to the forefront.
Her facial features are framed here by the soft, diffused lighting that minimises the irregu-
larities of surfaces, making her skin appear naturally smooth and radiant. As theorised by
Kobal (2006, 71), ‘the balance of light and shade is crucial in dramatising and conferring
an atmosphere of sexual allure on the [film’s] subjects.’ The dancer’s body is covered in a
white gown that glistens with jewels whilst Valentino-Ahmed, by contrast, is given a crisp,
sharply defined outline through the use of low-key lighting. Extra-textual strategies built
around Bánky’s early life in America contained references to her struggle in adapting to
new surroundings, namely in mastering the language and becoming part of the Hollywood
circle. *Motion Picture Classic* described difficulties she had in expressing herself in her new
tongue, attributing her perceived aloofness – and the resulting loneliness – to her heavy
foreign accent. ‘Yes, she is lonesome at times,’ explained the article, ‘and then she reads’
(Brewster 1926a, 72). In February 1926, *Picture Play* quoted the star:

I ant lonesome at first, mooch homesick. I know so few peoples, and I never go out. Home
to my bong-mow from the studio, my dinner, an hour to read, then bed. My rest I must have
or I cannot work. After a while I meet peoples. Inn it is hard to make friends. One, two, tree,
enough. (Gebhart 1926, 34)

To an extent, these accounts used the star as a means of articulating broader cultural shifts of
the time, mainly those related to personal isolation caused by the increase in social mobility.
Most importantly though, they cultivate the notion of Bánky as a ‘lonely stranger’ (E.M.H
1926, 133), ‘three thousand miles away from home’ (Shelodon 1925, 24), who needs guidance
in navigating the buzzing world of Hollywood. According to the fan lore, she treasured the kindness extended to her by Goldwyn, her producer, and by the fellow movie performer Norma Talmadge. One cannot help but notice the striking contrast between the terms that described Pola Negri’s arrival to America – where, paraphrasing *Picture Play* (McKegg 1929, 64) she was about to ‘dazzle the film colony’ – to the descriptions of Bánky and her first quiet months in adjusting to the industry. ‘The Discovery of Vilma Banky’ centres on such contrasts (Gebhart 1926, 34). Here Bánky comes forth as first and foremost an outsider, a misplaced and despondent little girl, which naturally located her in direct opposition to the persona of a foreign diva. Where Negri was seen as disrupting the status quo, and abusing the system in full awareness of her power, Bánky was said to have kept herself to herself, appearing confused or even unable to cope in the new cultural environment.

**Class**

Many critical examinations of whiteness point to the intersectionality between race and class. In his analysis of whiteness in film, Redmond (2008, 96) has demonstrated how star images were underpinned by racial cartography, where ‘spirit, purity and power became the markers of the refined upper class or nobility, while nature, earth/dirt and primitive urges became the ideological indicator of the working class’. Bonnett (1998, 320) theorised how ethnic identities were historically class-inflicted, indicating that the highest echelons of Western society were traditionally occupied by people whose skin toned seemed ‘hyper white’ in comparison to the darker complexion of the working classes. Applying this paradigm to Bánky’s figure, one can see that discourses of class and race are inescapably bound to one another. *Motion Picture Classic* deployed the idea of high social standing in the description of Bánky’s immaculate demeanour:

> Corliss Palmer and I dined with [Vilma Bánky] the other night and we three spent the evening together. She was dressed very simply, almost plainly, and her manner and appearance were that of a lady high-born – a typical princess. (Brewster 1926a, 72)

First of all, Brewster’s account mitigated the symbolic positioning of Bánky within the realm of upper-class. Secondly, it implied that Bánky possesses a special quality that eludes clear-cut definitions. The modest dress she wears remains at odds with the cultural notion of fashion that would be favoured by ‘a princess’, usually associated with expensive clothing, wealth of detail and ornament. In juxtaposing plain attire to the privileged background of his subject, the column creates a paradoxical image that articulates uniqueness of the star, where Bánky appears at once ordinary and superior to the members of the public (McDonald 2009, 7). In cultural terms, her identity as a princess is represented as hard-wired in her biology; she is imbued with a distinct ‘aura’ that cannot be disguised by the simplicity of her outfit. The rhetoric that described Bánky in the context of high class positioning remained its potency even decades after her retirement from the screen. Writing retrospectively in 1959, Franklin (1959, 122) opined:

> [Bánky] was a graceful, beautiful creature, a lady in the fullest sense of the word, with a regal bearing in every moment and gesture she made. She should never have played anything but princesses and aristocrats – and for the most part she never did. (…) And Vilma’s beauty – a timeless beauty that doesn’t change with the passing years – is still available on celluloid to those who have never forgotten.
In June 1929, McKegg (1929, 64) described his meeting with Goldwyn's chief star in the following words:

[Bánky] was dressed in white, which made her look wraithlike. The sun lit up her golden hair, and the whole effect caused my poor senses to swim and swim. Vilma was quiet at first. (...) It was obvious that this shyness was natural with her. I was quiet, too. But I had been stricken dumb by her ethereal loveliness.

Here the star is narrativised in reference to the rich iconography of the colour white – the symbol of purity – and to sunshine and light, which connote translucence and ephemerality. Accounts of this nature became a staple offering in the repertoire of articles on Bánky. For Redmond (2008, 93), whiteness manifests its extraordinary position especially in relation to light, which makes white women ‘glow, appear angelic, heavenly, and, ultimately, to be not-of-this-world, heavenly absences rather than fleshed beings’. By focusing on her white dress, the press mention not only highlights the radiant, ethnic characteristics of the blonde star but also suggests a sense of moral superiority. As suggested in Lurie's (1981, 185) discussion of the importance of colour in fashion, ‘white has always been popular with those who wish to demonstrate wealth and status through the conspicuous consumption of laundry soap or conspicuous freedom from manual labour.’ When employed in a context of luxury, white clothing functioned to convey the same ideological meanings to that of white people themselves, that is, the sense of superiority paired with restrain.

‘Vilma, with a bright aureole of love shining about her, wore a gown of chartreuse green and silver’ ('Gossip of All the Studios' 1927, 107), wrote Photoplay about Bánky's look at the opening of a new picture palace. The popularity of silver in dress is linked, as Stephen Gundle and Clino Castelli (2006, 123) suggest, to the measure of restraint and ‘a sense of [the] plurality of treasures’ it conveys, because it’s aesthetic effect is comparable to that of white and gold. Clothes and aspects of costume are implicit in cultural connotations, but are also assumed to indicate the personality and temperament of the wearer. The process of pointing out to both wider social differentiations and to one's personal taste is what Dyer (1997, 110) calls a dual articulation of dress. In explaining that ‘silver and gold could equally be represented by white and gold or by white garments and blonde hair’; Gundle and Castelli (2006, 133) make an explicit connection between these colours, ethnic whiteness and the notion of sophisticated taste, synonymous with high class positioning. Thus, the popular discourse evidences how the diligently regulated racial body of the star was utilised as a class marker, effectively situating Bánky within a fantasy of nobility and status.

Advertising constituted another avenue that succinctly outlined the appeal of Bánky’s star image by attesting to her conspicuous whiteness. Within the confines of commodity culture stars are both promoting a given product and further marketing themselves, because their endorsements capitalise on their image, whilst simultaneously working to increase their star value. In sponsoring luxurious goods such as perfumes, soap or cigarettes, movie players multiplied their commercial potential (Morin 2005, 4). In 1927 fan magazines ran a series of promotional articles that used Bánky’s image to endorse a brand of soap, a product having a particularly troubled history of generating racist images (Dyer 1997, 78).

Soap advertisements tend to implicitly refer to the idea of racial purity, promulgating the message that the cleaner one is, the whiter one's skin; ‘to be white is to have expunged all dirt (...) from oneself: to look white is to look clean’ (Dyer 1997, 76). Fox suggests that the obsession with cleanliness and personal hygiene is in fact just a visual extension of the fascination with whiteness, as it promotes ‘a white, Anglo-Saxon protestant vision of a
tasteless, colourless, odourless, sweatless world’ (Fox 1984, 101). Thus, cultural fantasies of whiteness tied physical cleanliness to spiritual purity.

The elaborately titled advertorial – *The Question a Stage Woman Always Asks Before Touching Her Face With Soap* – presents ‘women of the screen’ as a demographic for whom a beautiful skin tone is not only complimentary, but, due to the requirements of their work, a matter of necessity (Figure 2). The advertisement promises to disclose Bánky’s secret to flawless complexion, her rule to keep ‘that schoolgirl complexion’ (Bánky 1927; no page) by making a distinction between other soaps and Palmolive, a superior kind enriched with natural oils. The racial dimensions of the image are brought home by the association between white skin and the manufacture of the body that requires minimal intervention – or,

![Figure 2. Palmolive soap advert featuring Vilma Bánky from 1927.](image-url)
in fact, just maintenance – so it can be kept ‘natural, unpolluted and pure’ (Redmond 2008, 95). This piece of promotional material equates American women with the perfect embodiment of beauty, claiming that ‘America’s complexions are the envy of the world’ (Bánky 1927, unknown). As such, the article is careful not to mark Bánky as non-American. What is particularly intriguing aesthetically is the image of Bánky with a peculiar figure of a man, lit so purely as if to resemble a silhouette. By deploying this contrasting imaginary, the visual composition allows whiteness of the star to come to the forefront.

**Conclusion**

To the movie-going public, Bánky achieved stardom through a fortunate wrench of fate rather than through her conscious efforts, thus, her rise to movie fame was encoded as a patriarchal text that denied her any form of agency. Her star narrative shares a conceptual alliance with the figure of Cinderella, because she was positioned in terms of who she was not – that is, not influential, not active and not male. In orchestrating a publicity campaign that marked Bánky as a delicate woman of noble blood – and someone who was, to paraphrase one of the fan magazines, ‘forced into the show’ (Manners 1928, 78) – Goldwyn made sure that she was constructed as both normal and extraordinary. The publicity surrounding Bánky’s personal life shortly after she commenced working for his production company would continue to employ the notion of misplacement and loneliness, partially to account for her image as a shy bookworm, and partially to frame her as non-threatening to gentile, middle-class values. It also showed Bánky as an eager subject of Americanisation, as an actress who owed her ‘lucky break’ not only to her producer, but an individual in debt to the transformative power of America at large.

Several scholarly evaluations of racial and ethnic politics have followed Dyer (1997, 45) in suggesting that Western culture frames whiteness not in terms of ethnic belonging, but as a universal human ideal. Particularly in the mode of behaviour ascribed to women, being white is highly reliant on restraint and modesty, ideas that were repeatedly echoed in magazine mentions of Bánky. Details developed in these articles suggested that Bánky was, to use Everson’s (1978, 196) words, ‘solidly locked into the innocent, almost Victorian simplicities’. To put it simply, she incarnated the highest ideals of whiteness; her gentle way of being and feminine charm were a natural extension of her conspicuously white, physical attributes. Especially in juxtaposition to the sultry presence of Pola Negri, Bánky’s stardom connoted the ideas of naturalness and bespoke a sense of white superiority, which, in turn, helped her to lodge herself into the dominant discourse of interwar America.

**Notes**

1. Clara Bow has particular relevance to the Cinderella narrative and fan magazine star search contest as she rose to stardom as a result of winning such a contest, organised by Brewster Publications in 1921. For more details, see Orgeron (2009, 16).
2. For more information on the specificity of Negri’s stardom, particularly in relation to her frequent and highly publicised romances, please refer to Frymus (2017) and Negra (2001).

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