The embourgeoisement of the early American cinema, its drive to acquire an aura of respectability, amounted to a mimicry of theatre – its conventions in respect of genres, styles of performance, the architecture and design of cinemas and, in the best locations, the provision of liveried ushers and attendants. But there was one aspect of theatre that the cinema strove to avoid – the star system. Stage stars might appear in films, but the idea that actors in films might be stars only gained acceptance slowly, and even then was a competitive device that overwhelmed considerable resistance. The Motion Picture Patents Company ([MPPC]; The Trust), formed as a cartel out of the pooling of (especially Edison) patents, viewed film as a standard commodity to be rented to exhibitors at a standard price per foot. Basically a coalition of ‘old’-immigration interests, the MPPC was opposed by Independent producers and exhibitors, some of whom were from a new-immigrant background and did their main business with new-immigrant communities, or at least chafed at the Trust’s heavy-handed attempts to impose its quantitative monopoly. Some of the early companies within the Trust, notably Biograph and Vitagraph, recognized the importance of quality and sought to brand their films as superior products. But fearing demands for salary increases, this branding did not extend to directors, such as D. W. Griffith, or to leading actors. Recognizing that particular actors increased box-office takings, and faced with an intense audience interest in them, some of the independent companies took the view that an increase in salary costs would be justified by the competitive advantage to be gained over the Trust and rival independent companies. In the period from 1909, a number of exhibitors or producers initiated small-scale efforts to publicize the names of popular players. This trend was pushed to new heights in March 1910; Carl Laemmle of the Independent
Motion Picture Company (IMP; eventually Universal Pictures) revealed that a former Biograph girl, now signed with IMP, was named Florence Lawrence. As part of a publicity stunt, Laemmle took out a full page advertisement in *Motion Picture World* announcing that Lawrence would make a public appearance in order to scotch rumours that she had died in a streetcar accident – rumours that Laemmle himself had started, but ascribed to unscrupulous rivals (DeCordova, 1990: 56–58). Though not quite the first movie star to be named, the dramatic manner in which her name was revealed took her popularity to new heights.¹

The fan magazine, a new kind of magazine emerging around 1910, also encountered a demand for film favourites to be named. Requests to readers to express their opinions about particular films were outnumbered by letters requesting information about the actors that featured in them. The double movement of naming might be seen as the decisive moment of emergence, the first concrete manifestation of the persona, from the shadowy state, which I have called the eidolon. But in fact the process of identifying stars tended to repeat, albeit within a compressed time span, the entire history of the discourse.² The process through which this occurred, though seemingly a matter of increasing concreteness or specificity, was actually a process of increasing abstraction.

### Positioning stardom

In writing about the social meaning of stardom and celebrity, two broad approaches have been dominant. The first approach is the biographical narrative: claiming to document the star’s life course, it bestows a coherence that the star’s professional and private life may lack. This labour of construction, familiar to anyone who composes a curriculum vitae, is often no more sinister than putting the best face on the flux of circumstance. But in the case of the star, it is also supposed to legitimate a claim to wealth and privilege and explain its subject’s collective importance. The second approach, often embedded in the first, treats the meaning of a star as emblematic of a specific conjuncture in American popular culture.³

Of these two approaches, the biographical and the historical, it is the latter that produces the most convincing delineation of the social meaning of star images. But it is not the approach favoured by Hollywood itself, insofar as this is revealed in fan magazines, where writing about stars tends to be transcendent discourse written after the fact of stardom.⁴ Looking back from what you are today, it says, reveals what you have always been. This orientation favours a transhistorical or mythic