THE MERYL STREEP MYSTIQUE: A STUDY OF GENDER,

AGING, HOLLYWOOD AND A FEMALE STAR

by

Tracy Allerton

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

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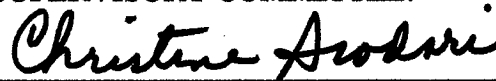Boca Raton, Florida

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THE MERYL STREEP MYSTIQUE: A STUDY OF GENDER,

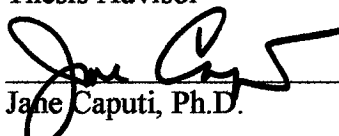AGING, HOLLYWOOD AND A FEMALE STAR

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Christine Scodari, School of Communication and Multimedia Studies, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.
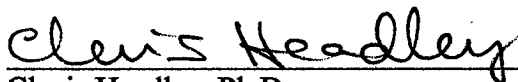
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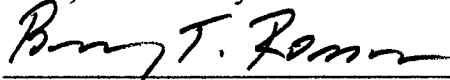Thesis Advisor

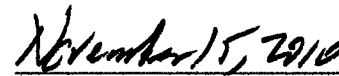Jane Caputi, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

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     This thesis employs a star study of Meryl Streep, incorporating pertinent feminist, reception and culture-studies theories, to investigate biases within the Hollywood film industry. The actress has enjoyed a resurgence as a leading lady at age 61. Streep's star persona, acting prowess and career arc are examined across three theoretical platforms—production of culture, textual analysis, and audience analysis—for clues as to why she has been singled out among her peers. This thesis posits that Streep's unique star image and surge in popularity have helped her break out of hegemonic articulations of gender and aging that privilege youthful beauty, putting female stars at a disadvantage within the capitalistic film industry. Also considered is the cultural significance of Streep's late-life success: Does she represent new openings for older actresses (and concomitantly, an increase in film representations of aging women), or is she merely an anomaly within the entrenched patriarchal system?

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION

INTRODUCTION

If you've been to or read about the movies anytime in the past thirty years or so,

chances are you're familiar with Meryl Streep. Often lauded as the best actress of her

generation—or perhaps of *any* generation—Streep has enjoyed remarkable success and

longevity for a female actor in the fickle Hollywood film industry. Indeed: At the age of

61, Streep has seen her career reach new heights in terms of positive buzz and box-office

returns, making her the go-to female lead for just about any role within her age range.

This feat is made all the more remarkable by the patriarchal nature of the

Hollywood film business—which has been run by white men since its early days in the

beginning of the twentieth century, and which values youth and beauty above all else in

its icons, especially for its female stars (Stoddard; Haskell; Bartky; Seger). Not only that,

but "film configures age to privilege the maturing male while denigrating his female

counterparts" (Scodari and Mulvaney). Patriarchal culture, in other words, carries "a

double-standard of aging" (Scodari).

Still, for men as well as for women, youth rules in Hollywood. Societal biases

have aligned with capitalist imperatives to dictate the kinds of films that are made by

mainstream filmmakers. Films are targeted to audiences that are segmented into four

general quadrants, in descending order of importance: young men (under 25), older men,

young women (under 25) and older women (Friend). It's also standard Hollywood practice to assume that spectators prefer to see onscreen representations that they can identify with—i.e., characters that represent *them*. (Stacey, Scodari).

Thus, the majority of films that are made today—especially the big-budget, "tentpole" productions—are targeted mainly to young males, and so contain a young male hero, a comely young female love interest, and, usually, lots of action involving fighting and explosions and car crashes and such. *Avatar*; *The Dark Knight*; *Spider-Man 3*; *Dead Man's Chest*; *Revenge of the Sith*—these are all top-grossing films from the past five years ("Yearly Box Office"), and they all fit that description to a "T."

Streep has navigated this industry remarkably well during her entire career, all the while maintaining her professional reputation, managing to live a fairly quiet family life, and weathering a few rough career patches here and there. Her star image is one that Molly Haskell has called an "anti-star mystique" (45). Streep scrupulously avoids the spotlight, eschewing the kinds of behaviors that regularly feed tabloid headlines— infidelity, divorce, drug use, on-set demands, etc.—and comes across as refreshingly modest and ego-free. Streep also is far from a publicity hound; in fact, she rarely grants interviews or appears on talk and news shows, doing so selectively, and mainly to coincide with her film releases. Nevertheless, in her thirty-plus-year career, a mountain of material has been generated about her, in the never-ending production of publicity and propaganda texts that are part and parcel of the capitalistic Hollywood film industry (Herman and Chomsky). Interestingly, it's hard to find much, if anything, negative that has been said of her—other than a few quibbles with her acting style, or questions about her choices of roles, or criticism of her orientation away from Hollywood.

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Even more remarkably, the multi-award-winning and -nominated actress (she's

received a record sixteen Academy Award nominations as of this writing), has seen her

star status reach meteoric heights within the past half-decade or so—a phenomenon that

critics and observers can hardly seem to believe. As Rachel Abramowitz noted in

December 2009: "After years of critical acclaim, she is finally winning wide popularity

and box office gold, at the age of 60. Her last nine movies have taken in almost $1.2

billion worldwide" ("Streep's Got Legs"). In an environment where female actresses

over the age of about 40 typically experience a sharp decline in both roles and income

(Goodman et al; Lincoln and Allen; SAG), this is especially noteworthy.

Theories about Streep's durability generally run along two related lines: her

talent, and her choice of roles. Many critics and scholars cite Streep's acting reputation

as the main reason for her longevity, such as Karen Hollinger's contention that "her

success in receiving Oscar nominations is perhaps the single most important factor in the

development of her career, stimulating it in its initial stages and buttressing it during a

midcareer decline" (73). Others contend it's her refusal to become a typical "star"—and

to thus fall prey to typecasting—that explains her accomplishment. Says Molly Haskell

(*From Reverence to Rape*):

> If there's one strand running through Streep's chameleon-like range of
>
> roles and impersonations [. . .] it's her determination to be an actress rather
>
> than a star in the old-fashioned sense and to do idiosyncratic, theatrical
>
> roles in a medium in which success depends on being loved by a large
>
> number of people. (44)

I would argue that *both* of these qualities, as well as a host of other cultural, industrial and ideological considerations, are involved in the making of Meryl Streep into a singularly successful American actress—or, as one unabashed fan/critic declared: "the best screen actress in the world" (Scott, "Unmistakable Streepness"). And it is all of these considerations that this thesis will explore further.

ISSUES TO BE ADDRESSED

One might observe (with a note of irony) that Meryl Streep's career trajectory has been from "character actress" to "leading lady"—quite the opposite of the path of the average female Hollywood star. Thus, the first part of the primary question is: How did she accomplish this unique transition? How has she been able to break out of hegemonic articulations of gender and aging that privilege youthful beauty, and therefore put female stars at such a disadvantage within the capitalistic film industry? The second part of the primary question is: What, if any, is the cultural significance of Streep's late-life success? Does it represent a true advancement for women, heralding a change in Hollywood thinking and thus opening up more spaces for media representations of older women? Or is Streep merely an anomaly within the well-entrenched patriarchal hegemony that still places considerable restraints and constrictions on women in film?

One set of secondary questions pertain to the actress as a star image. How has she attained her singular reputation for acting? What combination of skill, luck, timing, perseverance and/or career management has led to her success? And, finally, secondary questions will concern filmgoers and their reception of the actress. What is it about her— performance style, star persona, etc.—that consumers react so positively to? Who

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comprises her audience/fan base? Has this demographic changed over the years? How

instrumental have they been in the creation and maintenance of her star image?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Primary Texts

We must begin, of course, with the **primary text**, or the subject of the thesis.

These are the texts that will be analyzed in the course of this project. In a star study,

there are two sources of primary text: the individual star, and the star's body of work—

each of which comprises its own discrete text. For Meryl Streep, then, there are dozens

of prime textual materials available for analysis. These texts include Streep herself, plus

about forty-five films in which she has either starred or appeared.[1] This project will

emphasize Streep the star (as opposed to Streep the person), plus three of her most recent

films—*The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Doubt* (2008) and *Julie & Julia* (2009)—as well

as a handful of her films that are significant for reasons elucidated throughout the thesis,

such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Sophie's Choice* (1982), *A Cry in the Dark* (1988),

The Bridges of Madison County (1995), and *It's Complicated* (2009).

In addition, there have been mountains of materials written on the actress herself

(scholarly looks at the star, biographies, plus articles by journalists that profiled her,

interviewed her, or discussed her in some pertinent way) as well as her work (film

reviews by critics and by viewers, fan comments, commentaries by directors and fellow

actors, etc.). Since none of these texts is the actual primary text (either Streep the

person/image or her body of work), they all actually fall into the category of secondary

texts or paratexts.

Secondary Texts

Secondary texts are useful in two distinct ways. Scholarly works can be used as theoretical sources from which to cull insight, analysis and methodologies; and paratexts can be studied as an "extension" of the primary texts in the construction of the star's image. As defined by French scholar Gerard Genette, **paratext** consists of texts that comment on and complement a primary literary text, that "surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to present it…to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its reception and its consumption" (261). Another phrase for this, used for screen texts, is "metatexts"—which act as "liminal 'thresholds' between the text proper and its reception," according to Scodari and Mulvaney (par. 2).[2] Such materials include DVD extras and published articles, profiles and reviews of the star and her films.

What these and other scholars emphasize are ways of analyzing texts that consider the complex interactions between producer, text and consumers—within the framework of larger social issues. Marie Maclean, expanding on Genette's work, is particularly interested in the concept of **authorship**. The writer of the text, she says, bestows a sense of authority intended to influence the text's reading. Thus, paratext is a "privileged site of pragmatics and of a strategy [. . .] the place where the author displays intentions. Where he or she speaks to the reader as sender to receiver" (278).

And, though the process of interpretation (to be discussed further in the section on audience) *is* highly subjective, it would be foolish to think that all texts are completely **polysemic**, as Jane Stokes argues: "The primary power to create meanings lies in the major corporations which produce the texts and the people they employ…Texts are, of

course, *multisemic*—they are open to multiple interpretations—but I resist the word *polysemic* if that means that the texts allows you to interpret it as you will" (135).

When considering metatextual materials, it's important to distinguish between several categories of authorship: the "average" viewer, the fan, and the media professional (journalist, scholar or critic). Each of these categories bears a different weight of authorial "privilege." The average audience member, of course, bears the lowest authority; few filmgoers would make a choice whether or not to see a film based on the opinion of any old "Joe Blow." Fans, by dint of their cultural competency about the subject, usually bring a little more authority to their texts—some even becoming unofficial "spokespersons" or sources of news/gossip for the star in question. Media professionals, because of their expertise and privileged positioning as societal conveyers of messages, have the greatest amount of authority. According to Scodari and Mulvaney, screen reviews are metatexts that "can intervene in the process of reception" (par. 64). Indeed, many are the filmgoers who choose a film, and then judge it, based solely on the review of their favorite critic!

In her book *Interpreting Films*, Janet Staiger says that film critics' and scholars' works are "genres in themselves, thus their conventions mediate the results" (89), but she also considers film reviewers to be knowledgeable "surrogate consumers" who serve the spectator by "following up on the promotion and publicity promoted by the studios and affirming or denying the proposed reading strategies to counsel viewers about what they will see" (68).[3]

Pertinent metatexts—facts or comments about the star, film reviews, etc.—will be employed throughout the manuscript to illustrate, emphasize or bolster specific arguments, as well as serving as further fodder for analysis.

For further clues into this star and her image, there were also archival materials from Streep herself, such as interview quotes, acceptance speeches at numerous awards ceremonies, and a commencement address given at Barnard College in May 2010.[4] In the case of stars, then, there is one more category of metatextual authorship: the star him/herself! This source usually carries the highest level of "authority."

Scholarly Sources

Regarding Streep the actress, several sources proved quite invaluable for formulating an analysis. First is feminist film critic Molly Haskell, who, in addition to contributing to current discourses on women in film with her seminal 1987 work *From Reverence to Rape*, has written several pieces that discuss the actress. Haskell's insights into Streep's mystique center on the star's abilities, her "actressiness"—which, she says, "has become for Streep essence as well as armor" ("Finding Herself," 34).

Along that same line, a team of scholars led by Carolyn Adams-Price conducted an extensive study on Streep that they published in 2007, seeking "to discover the key to her artistry" (100), vis-à-vis a psychological concept called "empathetic resonance"—or "the ability of an object [e.g., the actor] to evoke empathy in another person" (e.g., the spectator) (100). The authors chose Streep as their subject because:

> We theorize that actors and actresses who can induce empathic resonance
> are judged better actors than those actors who cannot create an emotional
> connection with the audience. Because Meryl Streep has received thirteen

Oscar nominations, the quality of her acting is a fair standard by which to

test our theories about empathic resonance. (100)

They conducted a textual analysis of her Oscar-nominated films for clues as to why they

think the star seems to be able to connect so emotionally to her audience.

The empathetic resonance study is significant to my own work in several ways.

For starters, it is the most comprehensive examination of the actress's body of work that I

came across in one place. The researchers analyzed her performances in twelve films:

The Deer Hunter (1978), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979, won), *The French Lieutenant's*

Woman (1981), *Sophie's Choice* (1982, won), *Silkwood* (1983), *Out of Africa* (1985),

Ironweed (1987), *A Cry in the Dark* (1988), *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), *The Bridges*

of Madison County (1995), *One True Thing* (1998), and *Music of the Heart* (1999).[5]

What they concluded hews closely to what has been said about Streep's ability in other

materials (reviews, profiles, etc.). Basically, it is that, "Watching a Meryl Streep movie

makes clear one thing: Streep connects emotionally with the audience. We can remember

her films and can replay scenes in our heads years later" (105-6). Thus, their theory of

empathetic resonance does seem to identify a major reason for the star's widespread

appeal.

The Adams-Price team's work will be used in this thesis as a model for an

analysis of Streep vis-à-vis the *effect* of her performances in the films. But in order to

fully understand the actress's *affect*, one must also look at *how* she performs, by

identifying the methods or skills she employs in creating characters that deliver

empathetic resonance. Through my own research and observations, I have uncovered six

main themes: She does her homework; she connects with the character's interior; she gets

the outer details right; she makes you care even for unlikeable characters; she lets the

character unfold; and she does a lot with a little.

To further my contention that the star's acting prowess has given her an edge as

she has aged, I will briefly discuss the Adams-Price team's findings organized by these

themes, and then conduct my own textual analysis of three of Streep's films, for signs of

empathetic resonance.

Film scholar Karen Hollinger's book *Hollywood Acting and the Female Star*

discusses its subject matter on multiple levels, both semiotic and textual. She argues

persuasively for an approach to the study of film actresses that integrates studies of acting

with star studies: "The star actor is seen as an amalgam of complementary texts,

including performance, promotion, publicity, criticism, and commentaries" (22).

Hollinger then embarks on such an approach by analyzing five contemporary female

stars, including Streep. For Hollinger, the secret to Streep's success lies in several

factors, including of course, her talent, but also her carefully cultivated star image:

"Meryl Streep's image is composed of two distinct image clusters centered on her

renown as a great actress and her reputation as a devoted wife and mother" (79). Her

approach will greatly inform my own analysis of Streep's durability in Hollywood.

For a historical perspective, Abramowitz, Stoddard, Haskell and Linda Seger's

When Women Call the Shots provided valuable background materials about the

patriarchal film industry and women's place in it though time. And for biographical

information, books by Diana Maychick (1984) and Iain Johnstone (2009)[7], as well as

various Web-based biographies on the actress—particularly on her official Web site, Meryl Streep Online (MOS), and the industry site TalkTalk—were valuable references.

Cultural Theory

Meryl Streep does not exist in a vacuum: She is a very specific site of meaning(s) within much larger structures of nation, society and industry. To discover these potential meanings, one must first understand a few underlying concepts. It is critical to keep these foundational concepts in mind with any discussion of a cultural product such as Streep.

First is the concept of **semiotics**—the study of signs and systems of signification—which originated in the early twentieth century with the work of linguistician Ferdinand de Saussure, was advanced In the 1950s by Roland Barthes, and coalesced under a formalist theoretical system known as structuralism. However, semiotics is most useful to this thesis when applied in a **post-structuralist** sense, or via a "pluralism of theories that cross-fertilize each other" (Hayward, 362). For Stokes, "a semiotic analysis provides a way of relating specific texts to the system of messages in which they operate" (72). The way a text is enunciated is called **discourse**, or "the social process of making sense of and reproducing reality, and thereby of fixing meanings" (Hayward, 87). Thus, Streep is not only a text, but her star image is a discourse— a construct of producer, text *and* audience—within the larger framework of the structures mentioned above. Let's look at some of these key structures and how they bear on the subject at hand:

In 1845, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels came up with their materialist theory of societies, and coined the term **ideology**. They wrote: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (*Collected Works*, 5: 59). In modern-day America, the ruling class is comprised of the leaders of the political economy (the government-business engine that drives capitalism), and its disseminators—i.e., the mass media, which includes broadcast and print news and entertainment products, as well as the Hollywood film industry. As mentioned earlier, two ruling U.S. ideologies, consumer capitalism and patriarchy, have given rise to an ethics of consumption combined with one of youth and beauty.

And since the Hollywood film industry is a major instrument for disbursing hegemonic discourses on patriarchy, power and consumption, its products tend to bolster the youthful-beauty ideal. The process by which the values and ideals of the ruling class are disbursed through a society is **hegemony**, a concept devised by Antonio Gramsci. In cultural studies, hegemony is used in studies "which seek to show how everyday meanings, representations and activities are organized and made sense of in such a way as to render the class interests of the dominant 'bloc' into an apparently natural, inevitable, eternal and hence unarguable general interest" (O'Sullivan, 103). And yet, says Raymond Williams, hegemony is not a fixed and unchangeable thing, nor is it "singular": "Its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated, and defended [. . .] and in certain respects modified" (413).

One of the most powerful weapons in the hegemonic arsenal is **propaganda**, as discussed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky. "The mass media," they said, "serve a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their

function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society" (1). More simply, Stoddard describes propaganda as "a systematic process of selective truth-telling by 'official' social and cultural agents to foster a desirable response" (8). Overt examples of this can easily be found in advertisements, advertorials, and studio-created metatexts on stars and films. But discourses meant to convey a hegemonic meaning can also be found in myriad "legitimate" texts of media professionals and scholars everywhere—not to mention, within the primary texts themselves. Streep's career arc, then, must be examined through the prism of the various hegemonic discourses on gender and aging at work within the film industry.

Political-Economic Theory

As an industry, Hollywood is driven by the **profit motive**. Studios and producers make a profit by creating **commodities** (films and ancillary products), for the least expense, that will make the most money. "The greatest profits are earned by appealing to the largest possible demographic market, the so-called mainstream" (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 28). Recall the four audience quadrants that films are targeted toward, as elucidated by *New Yorker* entertainment writer Tad Friend: younger men, older men, younger women and older women. "A studio rarely makes a film that it doesn't expect will succeed with at least two quadrants, and a film's budget is usually directly related to the number of quadrants it is anticipated to reach," he says (4). However, since patriarchal biases toward youth and beauty are firmly rooted within the system, the lion's share of films coming out of Hollywood studios are aimed, mainly, at young men, older

men, and young women. Older women—actresses as well as spectators—have traditionally been given short shrift.

Another reason that Hollywood doesn't value older female viewers is because this segment of the audience is perceived as being hardest to "please." Notes Friend:

> Once they reach 30, these women are the most "review-sensitive": a chorus of critical praise for a movie aimed at older women can increase the opening weekend's gross by five million dollars. In other words, older women are discriminating, which is why so few films are made for them. (4)

But that might be changing—slowly. Thanks to the rise of a few females into power positions within the industry (Abramowitz, Seger), more women are gaining the ability to "green light" a project and ensure that it gets made. Says Sony Pictures executive Amy Pascal: "At an average of $50 to $75 million a pop, movies cost too much to have their appeal depend solely on one gender. If you can't get girls to go to the movies too, and other audiences, you're dead" (qtd. in Abramowitz, *Gun in Pocket*, 446). Streep herself has lauded this trend in recent years: "There are more women in the hierarchy of movie-making and movie-financing and they are more interested and less afraid of making movies that appeal to other women," she said in 2009 (qtd. in Teeman).

Thus, there have been a handful of notable films in the past decade or so that featured older female protagonists, such as *Something's Gotta Give* ('03), a romantic comedy starring Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson; *Sex and the City* ('08), the big-screen incarnation of the beloved HBO series, which spawned a 2010 sequel; and two films

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featuring Streep in the lead role—*Mamma Mia!* ('08), a film version of a hit stage

musical; and *It's Complicated* ('09) a romantic comedy co-starring Alec Baldwin and

Steve Martin.   These films had somewhat modest budgets, by Hollywood standards: $80

million for *SGG*, $65 million for *SATC*, $53 million for *MM*, and $85 million for *IC* (*Box

Office Mojo*). But their returns were impressive: $124.7 million domestic, $266.8 million

worldwide for *SGG*; $152.6 million domestic, $415.3 million worldwide for *SATC*;

$144.1 million domestic, $602.6 million worldwide for *MM*; and $112.7 million

domestic, $219.1 worldwide for *IC* (*Worldwide Box Office*).

Such numbers, of course, fly in the face of conventional Hollywood wisdom.

"Many studio executives have been privately convinced that it wasn't worth even a

modest budget to make films about women, particularly older ones, and they seem

stunned that a series of movies about middle-aged women racked up such enviable

grosses," says journalist Leslie Bennetts in a 2010 profile of Streep (1). Nevertheless,

these films have opened up a space—however small—for positive big-screen

representations of aging women. How Streep has both become a leading contender for

these roles, and also has been instrumental in their very existence, will be examined

further, partly by using the above theories of the industry's political economy and the rise

of females in power to analyze their impact on Streep's career.

Star Studies

So, what is it, exactly, that an actor *does*?   In her book, Hollinger provides a

succinct yet comprehensive description: "The task of an actor is [. . .] to construct an

inner model of a character and then convert that model into a believable enactment that

gives the illusion of spontaneity for an audience, yet also allows for the creation of a repeatable performance" (6).

And of course, being that the entire film industry is based on the process of commodification, successful actors are elevated to the level of **star**—an actor that has "capital value," according to Hayward (349). These actors attract audiences and fans, and so can command a higher price for their services. Hollinger says that "stardom serves to support consumerism, conspicuous consumption, Hollywood commercialism, capitalism and social stratification" (32). Says Paul McDonald: "Stars are used by the film industry as a means to try and manage audience demand for films" (5). Accordingly, Hollywood's star system ranks stars by their drawing power and "buzz-worthiness": A List (the highest echelon—currently, actors such as Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, Will Smith and George Clooney, and actresses such as Julia Roberts, Angelina Jolie and Cameron Diaz); B List (the next highest salaries; stars who have peaked at this level, or may be rising or sinking in status—e.g., Matt Damon, Robert Pattinson, Christian Bale, Jennifer Aniston and Katherine Heigl) C List; D List, and so on.

While actors are most definitely human beings, stars are, basically, constructs. In his groundbreaking work on star studies, Richard Dyer examined the **star image** and how it is a powerful signifier in our society. Calling a star image "extensive, multimedia, intertextual" (*Heavenly Bodies*, 3), he says it has four parts: what the industry produces (films, other texts), what the media say (paratexts), what the star says (text, paratext), and how audiences react (reception, paratext). Dyer's work helped usher in a host of scholars looking at the many ways that stars are constructed. For instance, Christine Gledhill sees the star construct as having three components—the real person, the "reel" person, and the

star's persona (a combo of the first two). McDonald addresses the business side of the star system, by exploring how the film industry creates a "phenomenon of production" (2) that has three basic parts: star as image, star as labor, and star as capital (6-14). And Yvonne Tasker observes that stars must always be "on" in service of their image: "In addition to, and indeed framing, any other specific performances, from movie roles to cameos, to public appearance and interviews, stars always 'perform' their star image" (179). Streep's star persona will be examined using the above insights as a basis.

According to Barry King, stars fall into one of two typologies of performance style: **impersonation** and **personification**. Hollinger discusses how these differ (6-7), and how perceptions about the star often depend upon which category he or she falls into. Impersonation, or "attempting to become the character played," she says, is the most respected typology because it is associated with "real" acting such as typically found on the stage; whereas personification, "seemingly playing oneself repeatedly in each performance," is usually associated with screen acting, particularly celebrities that draw audiences with their star "aura" as opposed to their acting prowess. Certain celebrities have taken personification so far that they have attained the status of **icon**. Think of Harrison Ford, for instance, and what comes to mind invariably is the swashbuckling, adventurous, charming rogue of the *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones* films; whereas Meg Ryan will forever be equated with the ditzy, adorable, blond protagonist of romantic comedies such as *When Harry Met Sally* and *Sleepless in Seattle*. Generally in mainstream Hollywood productions, impersonators are the "character actors" that give a film its gravitas, while personifiers get the lead roles because they are expected to bring spectators into the theaters.

Not surprisingly, Streep falls into the first category. "The determination to be different—each role not only different from each other, but different from what we assume Meryl Streep [. . .] to be—is the one constant of her career" (Haskell, *Reverence to Rape*, 45). As such, it's easy to assume that she has never gained status an icon—an assumption that would be wrong, for reasons that will be discussed in the main part of this thesis.

Reception Theory

Now we must consider the *viewer's* role in the making of Meryl Streep. After all, she would not be successful if people did not go see her films and derive enough pleasure from the experience to want to see more of her. Therefore, a study of her star image should include an examination of her audience—who her fans are, and how they interpret and react to the star and her performances. Streep's career has been bolstered by a significant fan base that is "wide and deep" (Burr); but she also has a "secret weapon": the devotion of baby boomers (Abramowitz, Bennetts, Gritten)—a massive consumer demographic[7] that has been influencing pop culture since birth, and continues to do so, by "dictating its own rules as it gets older" (Gritten).

As an actor, Streep has been quite favorably received throughout her career, her popularity arising from easily-deduced discourses of stars as impersonators. Streep's roles, on the other hand, need to be analyzed along two lines: how their reception has a) contributed to the development of Streep's star persona; and b) opposed or reinforced the dominant ideologies within the films. Several theoretical sources will be employed toward this effort:

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First is Stuart Hall's work on **encoding/decoding**, which helped illuminate the ways in which messages are produced, disseminated and received. Hall describes two levels of signs: denotative (what is produced) and connotative (the reading or interpretation), dividing potential readings into three types: dominant/preferred (adapting to or consistent with the dominant ideology in the text); oppositional/ resistant (contrary to the preferred meaning, either by understanding it but not choosing it, or by not understanding it); and negotiated (containing "a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements") (138).

We have already discussed the notion of polysemy vs. multisemy vis-à-vis texts (denotative), establishing the fact that the interpretation of texts (connotative) *is* subject to the influences of its producers. However, says Dyer (*Heavenly Bodies*): "Audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions that work for them" (4). As such, deciphering their interpretations requires a **context**-based analysis of fan reactions in metatexts such as comments and film reviews. "Readers do not just 'decode' hegemonic texts," says Staiger. Instead, their interpretive strategies are influenced by their "subject positions" as well as "aesthetic preferences and practices, knowledge and expectations prior to attending the moving images, and experiences in the exhibition situation" (*Perverse Spectators*, 30-31).

Also crucial to an examination of reception is an understanding of the interpretive process of **identification**, which Jackie Stacey discusses at some length in her book on female spectatorship. Identification is a complex set of processes that involves a moviegoer creating some sort of "relationship" with a character, actor or star, she says.

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This sense of connection is a form of empathetic resonance—which is a vital part of the feelings of escapism and pleasure that films provide to audience members. Stacey names several kinds of cinematic identification fantasies that fans can have: devotion, adoration and worship (feelings of wonder about the star); and transcendence, aspiration and inspiration (self-transformational and/or escapist fantasies of taking on the star's identity). She calls these fantasies "the temporary loss of self and the adoption of a star persona, especially in terms of sharing emotional intensity with the star" (151).

Other scholars have provided a blueprint for using the concept of identification in their textual analyses. For instance, in studying *Something's Gotta Give*'s discourses on romance, age and gender, Scodari and Mulvaney look for identification opportunities regarding its lead character (Keaton)—not only through the viewers' own subjective positioning, but also by the *choice* of viable positions limited to them through the hegemonic process. In the film, Keaton is a successful, 50-something playwright who is being wooed by two suitors: a rich, 60-something Lothario (Nicholson), and an earnest younger doctor (Keanu Reeves). Much is made of the "scoundrel" who breaks her heart versus the "nice guy" who genuinely cares for her. Regardless of how caddish Nicholson's character is, though, she ends up with him—the older, more "age-appropriate" suitor, in keeping with ideological values that sanction older man/younger woman pairings but vilify older woman/younger man couplings. Thus, spectators who might have identified with Keaton's desirability in the eyes of a younger man could only go so far in their pleasurable experience in watching the film, according to Scodari and Mulvaney.

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These theoretical platforms—possible subjective positionings and opportunities for identification—will be used as a springboard for a reception analysis of fans and of two of Streep's films, *The Bridges of Madison County* and *It's Complicated*.

As well, I will consider Scodari's notion of **currency**, or how viewers react to the text by looking into the future. "Long-lived currency," she says, "is the feeling that one matters and will continue to matter for some time to come" (5). However, as Scodari notes, because of Hollywood's emphasis on youthful images of women, the sense of long-lived currency "is largely denied the feminine subject in popular culture" (5).

This leads us into feminist considerations in this study of Meryl Streep as a star image. Feminist scholars are concerned with the sexist inequalities at work in our society, and their insights must therefore inform any discussion of gender and aging.

Feminist Theory

Modern-day feminism traces back to the 1952 book *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir. She looked at the ways in which **patriarchy**—a hierarchical, militaristic social organization in which resources, property, status and privilege are allocated to persons in accordance with culturally defined gender roles (Lerner, 146-7)—have made woman the second-class citizen, an objectified "other": "She is defined and differentiated with reference to the man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xxii). Feminists have used these insights to look at the many ways women are objectified, including as a sexual being—an object to be sexually desired.

From this has arisen a patriarchal standard of desirable femininity, by which all women are judged, says Sandra Lee Bartky. Though these beauty ideals can vary over time and across cultures, Bartky says that certain traits have remained fairly constant in Western culture: young, white, fair- and smooth-skinned, with dainty features, a slender but shapely build, and a docile, yet sexually available expression. And, since men control the media, they also control its **images**. "Popular media images relate to what a culture believes, wants to believe, and wishes to legitimize—these images are part truth, part myth, and part wishful thinking," says Stoddard (7). Hegemonic images of women, then, portray them as youthful, beautiful, and sexy.

In her book, Linda Seger writes about the effects of this "beauty myth" in Hollywood. She notes that—no matter whether the screenwriter is a man or woman— descriptions of female characters (lead or supporting) invariably focus on appearance, with words such as "attractive" and "pretty"—or, conversely, "plain," "overweight," or "unattractive." And for the men? "Fewer male characters are defined by their appearance" (223). Instead, they are defined by traits such as intelligence, self-confidence or integrity. Thus, non-conventionally handsome men such as Tommy Lee Jones, Harvey Keitel and Anthony Hopkins can become big stars, while "directors want the blond, glamorous babe. The producers say the leading lady has to be pretty" (222). The general rule in Hollywood is that female stars that fit this description are most in demand. Later, I will consider the beauty myth and its implications in Streep's career.

Because men do not see women as true equals, patriarchal systems and institutions operate in ways that exploit women, says Iris M. Young: "Gender

exploitation has two aspects, transfer of the fruits of material labor to men and transfer of nurturing and sexual energies to men" (49).

Thus, Streep works in an industry that exploits all women economically, employing more men (both in front of and behind the screen) and paying them better. Recent studies put numbers to this claim, and they are pretty bleak. Beginning in 2000, an annual Screen Actors Guild survey of casting data has found that, even though there are more women in the U.S. population, men have received the "lion's share" of roles in film and television in (62 percent in 1999—Kiefer).[8] Film scholar Martha Lauzen has also been studying Hollywood hiring patterns for nearly a decade. For 2009, she found that "women comprised 16 percent of all directors, executive producers, producers, writers, cinematographers,and editors working on the top 250 domestic grossing films. This represents a decline of 3 percentage points from 2001 and is even with 2008 figures."

Male actors also tend to have far more interesting and varied roles. Streep noted this conundrum during a 1990 speech at SAG's National Women's Conference: "There's very little work for women, and when we do work, we get paid much less than our male counterparts. And what work there is lately is odd" (qtd. in Abramowitz, *Gun in Pocket*, 235).

Gender and Aging Theory

Journalist A.O. Scott remarked that U.S. actresses tend to be "idols, commodities or fetish objects." As young women, they can certainly be any of the three. But, as they age, they are subjected to a **double-standard of aging** that afflicts women in general,

leaving "fetish object"—or, more to the point, "sex symbol"—out of their grasp.[9] In her

seminal 1983 work, *Saints and Shrews*, Karen Stoddard said:

> Men control the creative, financial and distributive aspects of popular
>
> culture entertainment [. . .] consequently, most of what we "know" about
>
> older women in movies has been what men thought about women and
>
> aging, not necessarily what women thought about the aging process and its
>
> impact on their lives. (145-46)

Films and TV shows produced by these men are "built on a basic premise: The audience

likes younger actresses (under 40) because they are perceived as attractive and feminine.

Conversely, the audience dislikes older actresses (over 40) because they are perceived as

unattractive" (Goodman et al.). "Growing up is fine. Growing old is not—at least not in

film and television land. While the female viewing population is aging, the

video/celluloid equivalent is doing just the opposite," notes actress/feminist Maggie

Millar. The 2006 SAG casting data study, titled "A Different America On Screen," bears

this out. "The nexus of gender and age creates an enormous impact on female performers

over the age of 40 as their employment rates fall substantially compared to male

counterparts over the age of 40," it says (56). According to the report, women over 40

had only 26 percent of the total roles for women, although they comprise 45.2 percent of

the female population; however, the older men's percentage of male roles was much

more reflective of the male population: 40 percent casting vs. 41.4 percent population.

Two recent studies on age and gender also agree with these findings. In "An

Analysis of Aging Women in Film and Television," a team of scholars led by Mark

Goodman and Carolyn Adams-Price looked at onscreen representations, and found, not

surprisingly, that "men retain their attractiveness and competence as they age, whereas women lose their attractiveness and become incompetent," (par. 5). Exacerbating this perception, they say, is the types of characters typically played by older women: the good wife, the contented homemaker, the harpy, the matriarch and the bitch, the feisty older women or the loveable granny, or the nurturing mother or the sadistic mother. Meanwhile, Anne Lincoln and Michael Patrick Allen examined "Age and Gender in the Careers of Film Actors, 1926-1999." Their findings were depressing, yes, but certainly not unexpected: "From 1943, to 1999, "male stars were able to maintain their average star presences as they grew older, while the average star presence of women declined precipitously" (626).

Lincoln and Allen had another phrase for what aging female actresses like Streep face: **double jeopardy**. In other words, they are disadvantaged by both their gender and their age, working in tandem. This phrase hearkens to work done by feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Trina Grillo, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Carole Christ who are interested in issues pertaining to **intersecting oppressions**. In this paradigm, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality—or the idea that we all experience life as sets of intersecting, interacting categories—combines with Young's definition of oppression, which Hackett paraphrases as "a structural phenomenon that positions groups in relations of subordination and privilege" (2). The intersection of gender and age is particularly cruel to women, feminists maintain. Its impact on aging females is wide and deep. "Western culture gives little dignity to the postmenopausal or aging woman," notes Christ.

I will consider the ways in which "reel" images reflect these ideological values, and at the same time, reinforce them in a kind of perverse cycle of semiotics. Pervasive

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screen portrayals—such as young heroines, or older men paired with significantly younger women—"can, via sustained exposure, modulate tastes and values through a cumulative process of cultivation. Separating representation from "reality" is futile since the former serves to filter and form people's sense of the latter" (Scodari and Mulvaney). Say Lincoln and Allen: "The differential representation of men and women in film and television probably contributes to the cultural devaluation of older women in American society" (628).

And yet, "reel" images seldom reflect the "real" images of millions of female consumers who are healthy, sexy, and interesting—and who love to go to the movies. "Contrary to the conventional wisdom of most producers, men and women attend films in roughly the same numbers and have done so consistently for decades," say Lincoln and Allen (627). Yet, Hollywood filmmakers have conveniently used their misperception as an "excuse" to produce fewer films about and for women.

To reiterate: Older women certainly do buy film tickets, and certainly in impressive numbers when they are given material that they enjoy. "Minds and bodies are not separable," notes Lynn Segal, "and the mind that inhabits an older woman's body is quite as likely as it ever was to crave companionship, affection and the confirmation that she is desirable, she is desired." Alas, rare have been the representations of such desirability.

But is this beginning to change, thanks to the recent spate of films featuring middle-aged women that killed at the box office? Streep hopes it may be so:

> There are several generations of women who have the habit of going out
>
> to the movies and buying a ticket, which is not so true (of young people).

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[. . .] But while we still have the habit of going to films, they damn well

better market to us and give us something to watch. (qtd. in Collins)

Part of this project, then, will be to investigate whether this is occurring, by looking at

some promising trends for older actresses—not just Streep—in film scripts and casting

within the past few years. Also, I will consider the possibility that Streep's success is

opening up even more opportunities for herself as well as her peers.

RESEARCH PROCEDURES AND METHODOLOGY

Procedures

In order to conduct adequate research to fulfill the three main areas of inquiry

within this star study (archive research, textual analysis and cultural analysis), I utilized

resources available through both academic and layman's channels.

I conducted a search of bibliographies of star studies, feminist studies, and books

on Meryl Streep, as well as a computerized search of the FAU library's archive

databases, using the key words and phrases "Meryl Streep," "gender and aging" and

"Hollywood actresses."

General searches on the World Wide Web, using similar key words in search

engines such as Google and Yahoo, yielded several useful and pertinent theoretical

articles in addition to countless pieces on Streep—interviews with and profiles of the

actress, quotes from others about her, film reviews, fan comments, biographical

materials, etc. These archival materials contributed sources both scholarly and

metatextual.

Also, a handful of Web sites were utilized for facts and data on the industry, as well as information about Streep. These included MerylStreepOnline (her official site); SimplyStreep (a comprehensive fan-base site); TalkTalk (an entertainment site with an excellent biography of the actress), IMDb.com (a legitimate site for factual information, as well as of fan-based reviews, etc.); Rotten Tomatoes (for professional reviews and Tomatometer "ratings") and Box Office Mojo and Worldwide Box Office (for economics-related information).

My personal library of academic books and articles provided a portion of the cultural, feminist and star theories covered, and research led to other resources, including books or articles to add to the framework for a semiotic analysis of the star.

Because this project did not seek to undertake any kind of "face-to-face interventional human subjects research," source materials for the audience portion of the study were limited to existing texts—specifically, Internet-based metatexts from Streep fans and followers, such as comments, gossip and film reviews. Since there are countless possible sites for these materials, the investigation concentrated on two main sources: Streep's Facebook fan page (which, in mid-November 2010 had about 460,000 followers, growing by about 1,000 per day); and the message board on the IMDb page for Meryl Streep, which draws fans of both the actress and film in general.

For the textual analysis, I obtained DVDs of the three films—*The Devil Wears Prada*, *Doubt* and *Julie & Julia*—and watched each one several times, including metatextual "extras" on the discs. The thesis also discusses several other Streep films— either recalled from years past, re-viewed in January-October 2010, on DVD, video or DVR, or cited from sources such as IMDb.

Methodology

Since this project undertakes a textual/discourse analysis of a human—the actress Meryl Streep—several theoretical areas must be addressed in order to fully comprehend the career arc of this particular film star.

But first, it must be made clear that a star study is not about looking at the star as a "person"[9]—but rather as an image constructed as a "saleable, realizable commodity," as defined by Jane Stokes (93). "Star studies are a form of discourse analysis exploring how the star is developed in divergent sources," Stokes says (94), and in order to be successful, they involve archive research and both textual and cultural analyses. And Hollinger contends that a holistic approach to star studies contains examinations of image *and* performance.

This type of study, then, requires an interdisciplinary methodology of the sort that is increasingly espoused by activist scholars—a "multiperspectival approach," as coined by Kellner and applied by Scodari and Felder and others. Says Kellner: "At its best, cultural studies contains a three-fold project of studying the production of culture, analysis of cultural texts, and reception and effects of those texts" (10). Jackie Stacey, for instance, argues that "it is only by combining theories of the psychic dimension of cinematic spectatorship with analyses that are socially located that the full complexity of the pleasures of the cinema can be understood" (33).

The thesis will employ a combination of theories from cultural, feminist and reception studies to conduct a star study of Streep across all three platforms of media analysis: institutions of production, the texts, and the audience. These three theoretical orientations best serve the particular area of inquiry—articulations of gender and aging.

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Cultural studies employs a combination of disciplines (e.g., film studies, sociology, semiotics, feminism and psychoanalysis) to examine how cultural values are produced, reproduced or challenged; while feminist theories aim to shed light on the pervasive and harmful gender inequalities within our culture; whereas the newest discipline, reception studies, concerns itself with the audience: how viewers interpret texts, how they react to them, and how they interact with them.

Organization

Chapter Two will begin with a brief biography to provide a basic explication of the primary text, followed by the meat of the analysis. Though a strictly linear discussion is impossible when utilizing cultural theories that intersect and interplay, this chapter will be laid out roughly in three parts, corresponding with the three main areas of inquiry: production of the culture, analysis of texts, and reception and effects of the texts. In Part One, the cultural and industrial factors that have created Streep's star persona and allowed for her career longevity will be examined further, including star image, acting typologies, the beauty ideal, gender and aging biases in the industry, the rise of females in power positions, and a look at Streep's economic impact. Part Two will provide analysis of the texts via two main approaches: The "star" as a text will be analyzed, with a look at articulations of her particular star image and status as an icon; plus an examination of her career arc (organized per Hollinger's five phases and adding a sixth phase for subsequent years) that incorporates quotes from paratextual reviews and interviews, as well as insights provided by cultural studies theorists who have written specifically about Streep. Then will be a discussion of her film texts, by examining closely her roles in three of her

most recent films: *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Doubt,* and *Julie & Julia*, for which she

received three Academy Award nominations for acting. Since part of the goals of this

project is to contribute original scholarly material, the analysis will include the Adams-

Price's team's theory of "empathetic resonance," plus my six categories of Streep's

approach to acting, to explain Streep's reputation as an impersonator. Part Three will

provide a brief examination of reception theory—with a look at who comprises Streep's

fandom, using materials culled from the Internet, as well as a look at the reception of two

films, *The Bridges of Madison County* and *It's Complicated*—for potential opportunities

for identification and currency, as well as patterns of preferred, negotiated or oppositional

readings for the actress's work. Elements of feminist theory—such as intersecting

oppressions of gender and aging in society and in film; and unequal cultural

representations for men and women—will also be woven into these sections. The

concluding chapter will summarize the findings, address the primary research questions,

discuss social implications such as the extent to which Streep's late-life success

challenges hegemonic notions on age, and suggest research that will further this line of

inquiry.

NOTES

[1] In addition, Streep has performed in dozens of stage, television, radio, and audio-book productions, all of which have been excluded from active research for this study as a matter of practicality.

[2] Because they pretty much mean the same thing, I will be using these phrases—paratext and metatext—more or less interchangeably throughout this thesis.

[3] Interestingly, the rise of the Internet as a primary mode of communication has worked to blur the lines somewhat between these categories: Fans—or even Joe Blows—can create blogs or websites and develop their own readership of people who agree with them or like their writing, thus establishing their own "authority" within that audience pool—sometimes even to the point of supplanting the authority of legitimate professionals. These bloggers become trusted surrogate consumers, as well. The Internet, then, has worked to democratize the process of signification and change the "rules" in ways that we are only beginning to understand.

[4] However, in keeping with her reputation as a "private" star, Streep has not written an autobiography (yet); so—unlike many other stars of a certain age—the archives are relatively devoid of metatextual materials sourcing from the star.

[5] Her thirteenth nominated role, in *Adaptation* (2002), the scholars did not consider appropriate fodder for their study on empathetic resonance, "because of its postmodernist plot structure and characterizations" (101).

[6] There have been a handful of biographies written about Streep, none officially endorsed by the star. I have chosen to use these two as major source materials for

reasons both arbitrary (I wanted to limit it to two) and logical (they were written at very different times during her career, early on and more recently).

[7] The U.S. baby boomer population is almost 80 million, by most counts (Haaga).

[8] This was the only actual percentage number I could find in my research. The most recent SAG report available, 2005-'06, claims that this pattern has held steady, without offering any specific numbers.

[9] Truth be told, this isn't such a big loss! Still, who's to say that being a "sex symbol" should only be within the purview of younger women? After all, older men do not have this same restriction—as proven by the likes of Sean Connery, George Clooney, etc.

[10] Although, naturally, personal facts do come into play—since we are, after all, talking about a person!

CHAPTER TWO

ANALYSIS

BIOGRAPHY

"She's a tremendously important artist
in our time. She's historically important."
– Actor William Hurt ("Regarding Meryl")

Meryl Streep was born Mary Louise Streep on June 22, 1949, in Summit, New Jersey. The middle-class family (mother Mary was a homemaker; dad Harry a corporate executive) moved to nearby Bernardsville, where Mary Louise grew up with her brother, Harry III, and sister, Dana.

Streep showed an early penchant for acting, getting into "character" as a child paying dress-up, and winning raves in school productions at Bernardsville High School (Wills, Maychick). She also proved adept at role-playing when she made a conscious decision to make herself over from "plain Jane" to "popular girl" and head cheerleader (Maychick), using as her model the images she saw in teenage magazines such as *Seventeen*—as this personal anecdote from her May 2010 Barnard graduation speech describes:

> I wanted to learn how to be appealing. So I studied the character I
> imagined I wanted to be—that of the generically pretty high school girl.
> [. . .] I ate an apple a day, period. I peroxided my hair, ironed it straight.

[. . .] I worked harder on this characterization really than anyone I think

I've ever done since. I worked on my giggle, I lightened it. [. . .]

Along with all my other exterior choices, I worked on my, what

actors call, my interior adjustment. I adjusted my natural temperament

[. . .] and I willfully cultivated softness, agreeableness, a breezy, natural

sort of sweetness, even shyness if you will—which was very, very, very

effective on the boys [. . .] this was conscious but it was at the same time

motivated and fully-felt—this was real, real acting. (Streep, "You're your

Mother and Father Proud")

Off this creature went to college—the all-female Vassar in Poughkeepsie, New

Hampshire, where she studied drama and English[1], spending a year as an exchange

student at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. After her 1971 graduation,

she earned her master's degree at the Yale School of Drama in New Haven, Connecticut,

where she appeared in more than forty productions with the Yale Repertory Theatre

(MSO). The young, talented and ambitious graduate made her way in 1975 to New York

City, determined to take the theater world by storm. This she proceeded to do—earning

critical raves from her very first Broadway performances.

The actress, who by now was going by the name Meryl Streep (Wills, 2), also

began receiving professional recognition in the form of awards and nominations—setting

up a pattern that still holds to this day. Her first Emmy was bestowed in 1978, for her

performance in the TV miniseries *Holocaust*; and her first Oscar came in 1979, for her

role as Joanna Kramer in *Kramer vs. Kramer*.[2]

Streep experienced personal heartbreak early on, nursing fiancé John Cazale (whom she met in 1976) through bone cancer until his death in early 1978. Just a few months later, she met sculptor Don Gummer, and married him later that same year. The couple decided to remain on the East Coast, settling in Connecticut. Their first child, Henry (Harry), was born in 1979; Mary Willa (Mamie) in 1983; Grace in 1986, and Louise in 1991. From the start, Streep made her family a priority in her life, choosing roles based on her children's needs, and proclaiming this fact often in interviews, such as: "Every single decision I make about what material I do, what I'm putting out in the world, is because of my children" (MSO, "In Her Own Words").

The 1980s were extremely productive and successful for Streep's film career. These saw her tackling a series of roles that earned her increasing plaudits and cemented her reputation as a master of accents and an actress gifted with incredible range. She received her first (and so far only) Best Actress Oscar for her performance as a Polish woman in 1982's *Sophie's Choice*, and her eighth nomination for her role as Aussie Lindy Chamberlain in 1988's *A Cry in the Dark*. However, Streep was also beginning to take some flack, too. Some observers scoffed at her seemingly endless quest for new accents to conquer. (As Web biographer Wills points out, "The dingo ate my baby," from *A Cry in the Dark*, became a popular—and mocking—catchphrase, 8.) Others found her acting style too methodical and serious, her screen persona too cerebral.

The last decade of the twentieth century saw Streep entering her 40s and spreading into other genres, such as comedy and action thriller. She moved with her family to Los Angeles from 1991 to '94, before returning to the East Coast. A highlight

during this period was her Oscar-nominated turn in *The Bridges of Madison County* ('95). She also took roles in lower-profile dramas as she approached her 50s.

In 2002, *Adaptation* brought her a thirteenth Oscar nomination—breaking the record previously held by Katharine Hepburn (the actress with whom Streep has been most compared throughout her career). This was followed by a series of diverse performances and three more Academy Award nominations, the last being for 2009's *Julie & Julia*. The past half-decade has seen the actress enjoying a huge resurgence in popularity and demand, starring or participating in fourteen films, with several projects rumored or in development at this writing.

Streep also has been very active in numerous feminist and humanitarian causes throughout her life. Her official website, *Meryl Streep Online* (MSO), has a diverse list of charitable organizations that she supports, including Stand Up to Cancer, Healthy Child Healthy World, Equality Now, Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, and It All Starts with Newspapers.

PART ONE: PRODUCTION OF CULTURE

Star Images

"The general image of stardom can be seen as a version of
the American Dream, organized around themes of consumption,
success and ordinariness." – Richard Dyer (*Stars*, 35)

Western culture is one that reveres its celebrities; so much so, that it's more of a *cult* of celebrity—whether these stars be actors, athletes, singers, authors, chefs, bloggers, designers, talk-show hosts, or whatever. And while there are many commonalities

among celebrities (such as fame and wealth), there are also subtle differences depending

upon the industry/industries in which they operate. Therefore, scholars such as Dyer and

McDonald would caution that one must understand the industry-specific dynamics in

order to fully comprehend a specific star's significance within the Hollywood star

system. And so, we will take a closer look a few of the pertinent cultural and industrial

factors at play in Streep's star image.[3]

Stars as Commodities

Though it's tempting for most scholars to concentrate on stars as images only,

Paul McDonald warns that this approach "loses sight of where stars come from. As a

system, Hollywood stardom is the effect of images and industry" (2). One must keep in

mind the capitalist imperatives behind the Hollywood film industry—creating products

for popular consumption that will bring the greatest profit to the producer (Friend)—

when considering an individual star's place within this system. According to McDonald,

stars are commodities with three components: image, labor and capital. Let's look at

each of these briefly.

Regarding the star's image, McDonald says:

> A star is never wholly unique. The images of stars appear both ordinary
>
> and extraordinary. Through their images, they appear ordinary and like
>
> other people in society. In this sense stars are not unique because they are
>
> typical. Stars are, however, also shown to be exceptional and somehow
>
> apart from society. (7)

The discourses at work in Streep's star image bear this out: She's a "family woman" who prefers a quiet life (ordinary!); but she's also a "great actress" with sixteen Oscar nominations (extraordinary!).

Because stars participate in a capitalist industry organized on "the structural principles of specialization and hierarchical power," they provide labor as "performance specialists," with stars enjoying a higher level of privilege, money and power than ordinary actors (McDonald, 9-10). Streep certainly enjoys the perks that come along with the elevated status of star—even though she may refuse to live the flashy lifestyle those perks would afford her.

As capital, stars are "a valuable asset for a production company" as well as "a form of investment, employed in film production as a probable guard against loss," McDonald says (11). Yes, their wages can comprise a large part of a film's budget—but the stars also provide invaluable promotion and marketing as a hedge against possible losses, while also contributing to the media-generated propaganda surrounding the film (Herman and Chomsky).

Though Streep does not promote her films as much as other stars might, she still participates in metatexts about her films that tend to intervene positively in their reception and bolster their ideological messages, thus giving them more of a chance of being money-makers. For instance, she took part in a teasing, light-hearted interview with *It's Complicated* co-stars Alec Baldwin and Steve Martin for *Entertainment Weekly*, which ran a month before the film's release in December 2009. In it, the stars riff on themes in the movie, including middle-aged romance and growing old naturally, as well

as on paratextual discourses such as Streep's star persona. (Declares Baldwin: "She's fun! And who's more beautiful than she is?"—Schwartz, 37.)

Stars as Performers

Recall Yvonne Tasker's point that stars always "perform" their star image. This is true across all three components that McDonald identified. Their image is constantly on display, especially when out in public—which consumers eagerly soak up via photos and stories in both legitimate and tabloid media. (Pity the poor star caught dashing to the store in a frumpy outfit, or wearing an unflattering dress for a big awards ceremony; these aspects of "ordinariness" are seldom granted to a star.) As labor, of course they "perform" their image for the screen—whether as an impersonator or as a personifier. And, as capital, they perform in the service of promoting their films and ancillary products. As already implied, Streep is the rare star who has managed to enjoy a long and prolific career *without* having to always be in "star" mode.

However, that is not to imply that the woman we see—who seems so funny, so smart, so *normal* in her interviews and appearances—is anything *but* a star persona. Instead, that Streep is, as Gledhill reminds us, a combination of real and "reel" person. "Through their performance, stars constitute themselves in terms of particular identities, touching on and operating across social and cultural differences," notes Tasker (179).

For example, one popular theme regarding Streep is her identity as an "anti-star" (per Haskell, 45). As part of that discourse, Streep claims that her career has just sort of "happened," without guidance from managers or a master plan on her part, as in this 2008 interview: "I'm not strategizing my career moves at all. I haven't got a career that I'm building. When I swim my 55 laps, I try to remember the movies I've been in order, and

I can't...the past is just a miasma. There's no career path" (Jeffries). This quote also reinforces her image of ordinariness: One can picture Streep swimming her laps, sticking dutifully to a workout regimen like most of us have to—and instead of, say, going over the grocery list to combat the boredom, she just lists her films in her head.

Personifiers vs. Impersonators

Superstars and icons that draw the biggest audiences tend to be personifiers, while those most respected for their acting skills tend to be impersonators (King, Hollinger). Both types are needed by Hollywood filmmakers to maintain domination in the industry, because "stars" draw audiences, while "artists" draw legitimacy and prestige. But, both types are rewarded differently: Big stars typically earn considerably more income, while artists earn more critical respect. For example, says McDonald, while Streep has garnered armfuls of professional kudos (84 awards in 90 nominations, according to IMDb), Arnold Schwarzenegger—whose action films earned many times more than hers during the period he was acting—never received one Oscar nomination. This snubbing, McDonald says, can be "read as the effect of a common opposition in cultural production in which profit is believed to be antithesis of art" ("Reconceptualizing Stardom," 185). Streep's value to the industry, then, lies in her respect and power as an artist; she has become a rare impersonator who can draw big audiences, too.

Cultural Factors

"It's hard not to think Streep is doing her best to imbue recent characters
with traits that our culture sometimes denies them, qualities
like sexuality, humor, dignity, compassion and basic humanity."
– Rachel Abramowitz ("Remarkable Ms. Streep," 1)

The Beauty Ideal

Western standards of beauty are so intertwined with cultural attitudes about aging it's hard to separate them into distinct categories. However, a discussion of the beauty ideal as it applies to Meryl Streep is warranted.

A popular premise about the actress is that she is not "beautiful" by Hollywood standards (i.e., the "beauty myth" described by Seger). Because film is such a visual medium, its female stars tend to be exceptionally attractive and photogenic versions of the cultural ideal for beauty that Bartky and other feminists have described. While Streep is undoubtedly a striking woman—with a mane of blond hair, high cheekbones, clear blue eyes and a lovely complexion—she has never been revered for her appearance. "Being unattractive is an accusation Streep has fought all her career, even in *The Deer Hunter* days, when she was a certifiable knockout" (Luscombe). Biographer Johnstone recounts a famous anecdote about the actress:

> Streep recalled going up for a part in a Dino De Laurentiis movie. "His son kindly invited me into the presence of Dino Sr. who spoke very kindly to me. Then he turned to his son and said in Italian, 'She's not pretty enough, why did you waste my time?' I understood Italian so I answered, 'Non me piace molto'—I don't like that very much—and I walked out of the room." (121)

Consequently, Streep has reportedly had somewhat of a "complex" about her looks. "I'm pretty aware of what I look like," she said in 1994. "I don't look like Sharon Stone, and I'm not built like her" (qtd. in Weinraub). Perhaps her refusal to see herself as beautiful stems from the geeky teenager that she worked so hard to erase. Or, perhaps she was just

never interested in buying into Hollywood's obsession with beauty. (She has dubbed the

pressure to be young, beautiful and thin the "Victoria's Secret syndrome" and calls it

"depressing," according to journalist Martyn Palmer). Instead, she has successfully

steered the discourse about her star image toward talent, not looks—and, in the end, her

refusal to become a "sex symbol" has actually helped keep her career going. "Streep has

had plenty of sexy movies," notes Haskell, "but she has never defined herself as a babe.

So she has had no earlier pin-up stalking and overshadowing her present self" ("Finding

Herself").

Intersectionality: Gender and Aging

I have already discussed at some length Western society's double standard on

aging, whereby "men retain their attractiveness and competence as they age, whereas

women lose their attractiveness and become incompetent" (Goodman et al.). But it's

important to reiterate just how instrumental the media are in disbursing this ideological

discourse—both in what is said and *not* said. Observes Stoddard:

> Images of older women in the media are "conspicuous in their absence—
>
> few magazine ads, television shows, movies, or the like, deal with the
>
> older woman specifically. Rather, the media extol the virtues of youth,
>
> and the desirability of maintaining a youthful image is a measure of
>
> feminine fulfillment. (5)

The impact of this double standard is felt acutely in the film industry, where

gender and age form intersecting oppressions (per Crenshaw, Collins, etc.) that

significantly disadvantage actresses. Citing the 1999 Screen Actors Guild study, Lincoln

and Allen remind us that "female stars have more modest careers than their male

counterparts, and this gap increases as they age" (626). Scholars such as Millar and

Seger also point out that the emphasis on youth has worked to significantly shorten most

female actors' prime earning years—the window being pretty much limited to the

actresses' mid- to late-20s (after they've had a chance to establish themselves) and their

30s (while they are still appealing and "sexy"). Observes Haskell: "Sex appeal is almost

as fragile, for a female star, as a one-night stand. Audiences are more fickle where

women are concerned, wanting ever newer, fresher flesh" ("Finding Herself").

Thus, many of Streep's contemporaries have plunged into the abyss of few and

crappy roles for women beyond their mid-40s. Stars such as Susan Sarandon, Diane

Keaton, Sissy Spacek and Sigourney Weaver have "fallen by the wayside, suffered

patchy careers, or bowed out, weary of sub-par roles" (Romney). Keaton, for instance,

has not been able to capitalize on the success of 2003's *Something's Gotta Give*; of the

few projects she has starred or appeared in (seven in the past seven years), many were

clunkers, such as *Mama's Boy* ('07) and *Mad Money* ''08).[4]

But Streep has managed to buck these trends that disadvantage aging actresses so.

For starters, discourses about her appearance have taken a startling turn, with media

comments tending to bolster her "desirability" as an image of attractive womanhood:

"There's a glow, a sensuality and a radiance about Streep these days. Put simply, she's

looking great" (Gritten). Also, she possesses a relatable kind of beauty that makes her

seem more like one of "us," says critic Stephanie Zacharek:

> She and [Alec] Baldwin are like movie-star versions of real people—
>
> prettier, most likely, than you and me, but still safely in the realm of the
>
> believable, with realistically imperfect skin and bodies that suggest an

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enjoyment of food or the experience of having borne children." ("It's

Complicated")

Another current metatextual theme about the actress is her counter-hegemonic

refusal to undergo plastic surgery, like so many of her contemporaries have done in the

elusive quest to hold on to their youth. "I think people look funny when they freeze their

faces," she has said. "That's just me. I don't get it" (qtd. in "Secret of Streep's success").

There is even a scene that plays on this in *It's Complicated*, when Streep's character has a

consultation with a plastic surgeon—only to flee his office after he describes, in graphic

detail, the facelift procedure. "If you've ever contemplated that stuff and looked at what

can go wrong in any of those magazines, it's terrifying!" she has said about the scene

(Schwartz, 38). Ironically, this is another facet of Streep that has worked in her favor,

because—despite the cultural pressures on women (and, increasingly, men) to remain

"youthful"—the inability to form natural facial expressions has harmed the careers of

many stars that *have* had surgery, notes photographer Brigitte Lacombe, who has shot

many images of Streep over the years:

> To try to stop the time, to look young—it's such a futile, absurd way to
>
> look at life in general, and it's very detrimental to [actors'] work. [. . .]
>
> their face is their tool, and also what they understand about life, what they
>
> go through in life. If you alter it, you deprive yourself of some of what
>
> you need to do your work well. (qtd. in Bennetts, 4)

Industrial factors

"I don't think my movie would have been made without Meryl."
– Nora Ephron, writer/director of *Julie & Julia* (qtd. in Bennetts, 1)

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Females in Power

One of the main reasons that female stars have less work and make less money is, of course, the dearth of women decision-makers in the studios. It wasn't always so, says Seger: "From the early 1900s to the early 1920s, there were hundreds of successful and prolific women in film. Anything seemed possible. The film industry was open to anyone with talent and determination and a dream. [. . .] Under these conditions, women excelled" (9). Until the industry's shift to Hollywood and the resulting rise of the studio system in the early to mid-1920s, that is. "The studios were run by men," Seger notes, "and men hired men. They ran their studios to make money—a lot of it—and to create an efficient business that had control over every aspect of moviemaking, from production to distribution to exhibition" (13). Women were bypassed in this incorporation, while those who had done so well previously as independent filmmakers could no longer compete with the studios.

And so, for most of the twentieth century, the men held tight control over the films that were made—and therefore the images contained within those films. But, within the last thirty years or so, women have slowly made their way into positions of power within the industry. "By 1994, women's numbers began to be sufficient to begin to see a difference," writes Seger. "Thirty-five percent of executives at the major studios were women. Twenty percent of all production deals at studios were with women" (xiv-xv). Executives such as Sherry Lansing (former president of 20th Century-Fox and chairwoman of Paramount's Motion Picture Group), and Amy Pascal (current chairwoman of Columbia Pictures) have championed Streep from early on. Lansing, for instance, while an executive at Columbia Pictures lobbied the producers of *Kramer vs.*

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Kramer to have Streep audition for the role of Joanna, instead of a walk-on part for which

she was originally considered (Johnstone, 54). Many times, these women have had to

battle the ingrained attitudes of male executives just to get the films made. "Donna

Langley [the president of production] was our champion at Universal for *Mamma Mia!,"*

Streep told Abramowitz in 2008. "Nobody wanted to make that. The smart guys banked

on *Hellboy* to carry them throughout the year. The *Mamma Mia!* wagon is pulling all

those movies that didn't have any problem getting made. Our budget would have fit in

the props budget of *Hellboy*"[5] ("Remarkable Ms. Streep," 2).

However, before we wave a triumphant flag for feminisms, it should be noted that

this is still the early stage of female ascendency in the industry, and women have a ways

to go before they can have a significant impact on what gets produced; just look at

Martha Lauzen's figures of the number of women employed in big-budget films for

proof. Sunta Izzicupo, a veteran television executive, notes that "women do not have, for

the most part, meteoric rises. Women have to prove themselves to men" (qtd. in Seger,

263). Thus, the majority of female-backed films have been quite traditional texts—or

nothing that would threaten the old-boys club *too* much. These stories have, basically,

reinforced hegemonic ideas about femininity, family, careers, and the like. Even *Kramer*

vs. Kramer features "a theme strongly critical of the independent woman," Hollinger

points out before she takes to task Streep's work in the past decade or so:

> Many of these works, such as *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Marvin's*
>
> *Room*, *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *One True Thing*, are unabashedly
>
> women's tearjerkers that associate femininity stereotypically with
>
> uncontrolled emotional expression and maudlin sentimentality." (95)

Hollywood's Political Economy

You've got to hand it to Hollywood: No matter what the power-players' personal opinions on individual films might be, in the end, money talks the loudest. Keep in mind that in today's environment, *all* projects are basically a gamble: "The proportion of flops to hits throughout the studios is something over five to one with the latter compensating for the former," Johnstone says (xiv)—whereas Streep's films have an impressive success rate of one in two (xv). So, even the most chauvinistic men in the studios had to take notice when Streep's films started raking in the bucks—*big* bucks. Her last five films— *It's Complicated, Fantastic Mr. Fox* (an animated film), *Julie & Julia, Doubt* and *Mamma Mia!*—have brought in $888.3 million worldwide.[6] These films also have had staying power, which in Hollywood is rare:

> Many of Streep's recent hits have opened solidly but not spectacularly, then kept chugging along, bucking the trend of movies making the majority of their money in the first weekend (her movies have "legs," to use the industry parlance, indicating positive word of mouth from audiences after they leave the theater). (Abramowitz, "Streep's Got Legs")

These kinds of numbers have given the actress a growing amount of respect—and power—in the industry. Nora Ephron, Streep's director in *Julia & Julia,* implied to interviewer Bennetts that Streep's attachment to a project greatly increases its chances of making it to the big screen. Streep is even being credited in some discourses as opening up space in film texts to accommodate more aging women (a contention to be addressed

at a later point). For instance, *Entertainment Weekly*'s most recent "50 Most Powerful

Entertainers" list (October 2010), lists Streep at number twenty,[7] declaring:

> She's Hollywood's greatest living actress, yes, but even more impressive,
>
> she's a box office force greater than most women half her age. Streep's
>
> commercial ascension validates that she really can do anything—drama
>
> (*Doubt*), musical (*Mamma Mia!*), romantic comedy (*It's Complicated*).
>
> Plus, it ensures that the Sandras and Reeses won't have to stop working
>
> when they hit 50. (35)

Studios have even more reason to salivate over the prospect of acquiring Streep

for a project, because she is, relatively speaking, an inexpensive line-item on the budget

for talent. Thanks to the success of these recent films, her per-film salary range has risen

to $7 million-$8 million—which is still far less than the asking price of younger A-

Listers such as Angelina Jolie ($20 million), Reese Witherspoon ($15 million), Julia

Roberts ($10 million-$15 million), Katherine Heigl ($12 million) and Cameron Diaz ($10

million), according to the *Hollywood Reporter*. Unlike some of those other stars, who

have spotty records of success in their films,[8] casting Streep in a movie is almost

guaranteed these days to pay off. Says film historian Jeanine Basinger: "Her presence in

a film is an endorsement that says to the ticket buyers that you're not going to be cheated.

That is what stardom has come down to—value for your money" (qtd. in Abramowitz,

"Streep's Got Legs"). *Forbes* even named her on its latest list of the top ten actors who

give the most "bang for the buck," with an impressive return on investment of $21 for

every dollar in salary she receives (Pomerantz).[9]

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The Streep Effect

But Streep's most successful films have done something even more powerful than make lots of money: They have influenced consumers and caused an economic boost for things *associated* with these films. The "Streep Effect" was first felt in the 1980s, when tourism in Kenya increased after *Out of Africa* was released; "today, however, Streep is experiencing a career renaissance that is making her not merely one of Hollywood's favorite names, but one with a Midas touch" (Romney). For instance, after *Julie & Julia* came out, booksellers couldn't keep copies of Child's then-48-year-old book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* on shelves, while Powell's memoir and Child's other books *My Life in France* and *Julia's Kitchen Wisdom*—not to mention cookware and French cooking classes—also got big boosts (Clifford, Romney). The worldwide smash *Mamma Mia!* had an even bigger effect on consumers: "Not only did [ABBA's] Gold collection top the album charts, there was also a surge in demand from couples who wanted to marry on the Greek island of Skopelos, as in the film, with easyJet reporting flights up 13 percent in the months after the film's release" (Romney). Says Melissa Silverstein in a blog post on the Women and Hollywood website:

> I just love the fact that we are talking about a 60-year-old woman with ancillary economic power. Remember boomer women have money and time and LOVE Meryl Streep. If she continues to pick films that are diverse and interesting and continues to show us all how she is enjoying her work and her life she will be successful.

Will be successful? I'd say she already has been—several times over! Streep's star persona and unique combination of intelligence and versatility have put her, literally, in a league of her own. For more clues to Streep's success, a closer textual analysis is in order.

PART TWO: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Streep's Star Image

"An anti-star mystique seems to govern her life and her roles,
a convergence, perhaps of her seriousness as a performer
and the inhibitions of a well-bred Protestant."
– Molly Haskell ("Hiding in the Spotlight," 45)

The superlatives for Streep began early, and continue to this day. She is widely lauded as "the best actress of her generation." She also comes across in person as genuinely *nice*—warm, witty, level-headed, frank, family-oriented, and extremely intelligent.

But this reputation did not happen by "accident." Instead, it came about though a combination of factors including education, skill, personality, publicity, and personal and professional choices. In other words, Meryl Streep's star image—as Dyer, Hollinger, Tasker and others would say—has been elaborately constructed out of these various discourses, while also being "characterized by the inclusion of diverse and potentially contradictory elements" (Tasker, 179). Recall Hollinger's contention that "Meryl Streep's image is composed of two distinct image clusters centered on her renown as a great actress and her reputation as a devoted wife and mother" (79). These two image clusters—career woman *and* family woman—are, indeed, potentially contradictory. Let's look at each.

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A Great Actress

Streep is mostly recognized for her ability to get deep into character, no matter whom she is playing. Her hallmark acting trait has been described as "chameleonism" (Scott, "Unmistakable Streepness") and "actressiness" (Haskell, "Finding Herself"). Streep approaches her roles, says Hollinger, through a unique combination of "Method" acting (internally—getting in touch with the character's emotions, motivations and personality) and "theatrical" acting (externally—adopting specific accents, character mannerisms, style of dress, etc.) (p 86).

Moreover, her reputation as an "impersonator" has brought her a special level of esteem in Hollywood. "While all film performers can be said to act onscreen, how they act will determine if they are respected as an 'actor,' " says Paul McDonald ("Reconceptualizing Stardom," 185). Media professionals have helped reify Streep's reputation, through statements that call her "our designated Hollywood artiste" (Burr) and the like. Such esteem cannot be underestimated in its effect on an actor's viability throughout his or her career.

A Family Woman

In addition to pursuing a demanding acting career, Streep has made her family an important part of her life from the beginning, crediting them with keeping her grounded: "Children keep you anchored to reality. You're on a movie set and everyone gets you coffee and asks you what you need. And then I go home and I'm waiting on tables like I was in college" ("In Her Own Words"). Career and family are difficult priorities to balance for anyone, let alone a high-profile star such as Streep, and her seeming ability to "have it both ways" has been widely admired by media professionals and fans alike.

Part of her personal image is also wrapped up in activism, supporting feminist and humanitarian causes that she has championed from early on—participating in rallies, organizing benefits, and helping out in many other ways. However, as Hollinger points out, "Streep's support for numerous social causes is a muted aspect of her image that her publicity often cloaks under the cover of maternal instinct" (85). Indeed, Streep usually downplays her activism, saying her children are its major impetus, such as in this 1983 commencement speech at Vassar:

> I've found as my networks expand and my responsibilities multiply, so does my future stake in the world, and instead of feeling the desire to keep quiet I feel the need to demand the best of our leaders, to secure the quality of the life my children will live in the next century, to secure the *fact* of their survival into the next century. (qtd. in Maychick, 156)

Also, Streep "has consistently guarded her family's privacy and her own, avoiding as much of the red-carpet hoopla and self-exposure in service of publicity as she could get away with" (Bennetts, 3). She has eschewed the typical star entourage of hangers-on and sycophants, including managers and stylists and the like (Teeman). Yet, her avoidance of the Hollywood lifestyle has actually *added* to her mystique, which media professionals are happy to pass along. "Streep didn't hang out in Malibu. She lived in SoHo, the Upper East Side, Connecticut. She married [. . .] and began raising a family. And Hollywood loved it. Loved her distance, her reclusiveness and, to some extent, her aloofness from the place" (Weinraub).

The actress's coyness about her personal life, no doubt, came from the maternal desire to protect her children from the harsh spotlight of celebrity. But it might also

spring from an uncannily intuited sense that the less people know about a star, the better.

When once asked in an interview about the importance of protecting her private life, she

replied: "I don't think it helps the suspension of disbelief if everybody knows where you

work out. There's so much that undermines our work as actors—promotion and stuff.

It's too bad" (Goldfarb).

A Unique Combination

Streep's identity, then, is a complex mixture of Ivy Leaguer and everywoman,

feminist and traditional family woman, Hollywood star and happy suburbanite. In some

ways, she has advanced the cause of feminism throughout her career, especially with

recent roles that represent figures of female authority—but not so much as to pose any

kind of significant threat to the ideologies ensconced in the industry, at least not up to this

point in time. Hollinger notes that Streep's reputation, which is based on her talent and

not her looks, makes her "a very progressive figure in the history of the Hollywood

female star"—in that her focus on female-centered stories, her avoidance of graphic sex

scenes, and her ability to influence the direction of her characters, have paved the way for

other actresses. On the other hand, "a number of extremely traditional aspects of Streep's

star persona render her a very safe female role model for contemporary women and

recuperate her progressivity for the patriarchal status quo" (Hollinger, 95).

Status as an Icon

"Isn't that what movie stars do, as opposed to great actors
—work appealing variations on an established persona?"
– Film Critic Ty Burr

Let us now revisit the question of whether or not Streep has achieved the status of "icon." Recall previous examples of iconic stars, the personifiers Harrison Ford and Meg Ryan, who seem to play a version of "themselves" in every role—or, as Dyer would say, they embody a discernable "type" that audiences have come to expect from their performances. This consistency—of performance, of type—carries meaning from role to role. When consumers hear it's a Harrison Ford picture, for instance, they expect that it will be a big-budget action thriller with Ford as the hero who saves the day. Of course, the downside of being an icon is typecasting, or the inability to stretch out of the boundaries set forth by the iconic archetype being embodied.[10]

Streep, the impersonator, has certainly avoided the trap of typecasting. "The determination to be different—each role not only different from each other, but different from what we assume Meryl Streep [. . .] to be—is the one constant of her career," notes Haskell ("Hiding in the Spotlight," 45). Consequently, one might assume that it would be impossible for her to ever become an icon. However, as A.O. Scott points out, "she used the particularities of these disparate characters to reveal some essential facet of herself, an ineffable but unmistakable Streepness." Indeed, she *has* developed a sort of persona, as well as a set of acting "tics" that can be detected in her work—a particular pursing of the lips, a sideways glance of the eyes, a fluttering of the hands, a toss of the hair—that, together, can definitely be seen as "Streepness." In 2006, *Time* journalist Belinda Luscombe interviewed Streep and observed:

> Here's what a conversation with Meryl Streep would look like with the
> sound off: Talking. Distracted head shake from *Sophie's Choice*. More
> talking. Sideways glance into the middle distance from *Kramer vs.*

Kramer. Another, longer set of words. Wearied blink—*The French*

Lieutenant's Woman. Pause. Statement. Huge wicked giggle. [. . .]

Listen to Streep long enough, and you can see every character she has ever

played. But none of them are her.

So, it seems that Streep *has* become an icon—a star that carries meaning from

role to role. But instead of being a character "type" (girl next door, swashbuckling hero,

etc.), Streep's "meaning" is her persona as an "artiste" of singular talent, taste and appeal.

This persona has raised her star wattage considerably, giving her an unparalleled level of

cache, and extending her viability as an actress long after many of her female peers have

faded into the background.

However, Streep's power extends only so far in male-dominated Hollywood; she

can control only so much in her career. The two areas in which she has the *least* control

are her age, and the scripts from which she gets to choose. "You play the cards you're

dealt," she once said. "I've done the parts that have marched into my living room [. . .].

Every actress will tell you they have maybe two things per year that they can possibly

stand to put themselves into" (Weinraub).

So, let's take a look at some of the roles she *has* put herself in to, first by

examining her overall career, and then looking more closely at some key performances.

Career Arc

"She's going to have a lot of primes. In her 80s,
Meryl Streep will be giving great performances."
– Alan J. Pakula, *Sophie's Choice* director ("Regarding Meryl," MSO)

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To analyze Streep's career trajectory, it's helpful to separate it into discrete chunks. Karen Hollinger's five-phases breakdown of the star's career arc (75-79) provides a useful framework, provided a sixth phase is added to account for the years since Hollinger published her book in 2006. This section will take a look at various discourses surrounding the star's image vis-à-vis her roles and performances, as well as pertinent cultural or industrial factors. Film reviews and quotes by and about the star will be used as paratextual extensions of the text (per Genette). In addition, insights provided by Hollinger and other cultural scholars will be included to form a fuller analysis.

1. Early training and success ('75-'77):

Almost from the start, Meryl Streep began attracting positive media attention. These media-generated paratexts, as Dyer and McDonald would point out, were laying the foundation for Streep's star image; Herman and Chomsky would say they also served as propaganda in advancement of the star system. In one example of early publicity for Streep, a 1977 *Seventeen* feature titled "Spotlight: Meryl Streep" portrayed the actress as an up-and-comer with a charmingly self-deprecating manner:

> Later this year, she makes her movie debut in *Julia*. [. . .] "The part in the movie came out of the blue," Meryl says. "I thought I'd perpetrated some sort of great hoax, that they would find out I was a charlatan. I was so nervous the first day on the set that I broke out in hives!"

Streep's choices impacted her image, as well, especially her avoidance of sex-kitten roles. Biographer Iain Johnstone points out that the actress, who was almost 30 when she broke into film, had few "young love" scripts coming her way anyway (35-

36)—in keeping with Hollywood's emphasis on youthful ingénues for these types of

roles. Regardless, Streep was not interested in such roles, which would have quickly

typecast her, limiting her choices and her viability as a dramatic actress. Instead, she was

drawn to material that offered her a chance to stretch with every new role—scripts that

were not easy to find, given the lack of quality material for women that comes out of

male-centric Hollywood (Abramowitz, Haskell, Seger, Stoddard). In 1980, Streep

complained to friends: "This is a particularly unadventurous time intellectually and

artistically, even in terms of entertainment. I feel worried, because my livelihood is

threatened because I'm not interested in doing most of the films that are being made"

(qtd. in Maychick, 110). The films she *was* interested in—i.e., a "Meryl Streep film"—

were "typically very character driven, often containing a complex, enigmatic heroine

whose internal crisis provides the central enigma of the drama" (Hollinger, 73).

2. Initial film roles as supporting player ('77-'79):

According to Hollinger, Streep began her film career by taking as much control as

possible over her roles, and "accepting small, underwritten parts that she worked to

develop and expand [. . .] in major, big-budget, heavily promoted films" (76). This

determination not to let Hollywood "control" her career became a central theme in the

metatexts about her star image. But she did so with varying success—gaining acclaim

for certain roles (e.g.,1978's *The Deer Hunter*) but barely making a blip in others (e.g.,

1979's *Manhattan*).

Her major breakthrough, undoubtedly, was in 1979 as Joanna Kramer in *Kramer*

vs. Kramer. The character originated (in the novel on which the film was based) as a

one-dimensional "villainess" who suddenly divorces her workaholic husband (Dustin Hoffman), leaving him to care for their young son, only to return a year or so later and sue for custody. But, both Hoffman and Director Robert Benton wanted to soften and humanize Joanna so as not to alienate female spectators, enlisting Streep to help them do so (Johnstone, Maychick). Streep worked hard on finding redeeming features for the character, even contributing the dialogue for her critical courtroom speech at the film's climax.

In a 2000 interview, Streep recalled her internal process of identifying with Joanna, so she could better play her:

> In 1979, nobody was talking about depression, but this woman probably thought about killing herself once or twice every day. I could understand the compulsion to leave and not want to take your little boy wherever you were going in order to get better. I didn't think she was horrible—I read it and I was on her side." (qtd. in Harris, 1)

Though this interview occurred many years later and therefore cannot be seen as publicity efforts for the film, it does serve as propaganda, as Herman and Chomsky would say, in support of Streep's star image as an impersonator.

Streep's efforts in the film were well rewarded, garnering her almost universal praise (e.g., "Streep again shines in a 'minor' role she manages to make 'major'—Pollock), as well as an Oscar and a Golden Globe as supporting actress, plus recognition for supporting performance of the year from several film critics societies (IMDb). The film also grossed a then-astounding $106.3 million (Box Office Mojo). Suddenly, Streep was thrust into leading-lady territory, entering a golden period that lasted nearly a decade.

3. Major stardom as dramatic film heroine ('81-'88):

This was the phase that cemented Streep's persona as an "artiste" as well as a star (Hollinger, Haskell). Beginning with her Oscar-nominated performance as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* ('81), Streep starred in a string of well-received films, racking up critical praise, nominations and awards. She tended to choose projects that would challenge her in new ways (Hollinger). She also gravitated toward portraying real-life women. Her choice of parts (and accents) was diverse, veering from a dual role as historical heroine and modern actress in *TFLW*, to a working-class activist in *Silkwood* ('83), to Danish writer Isak Dinesen in *Out of Africa* ('85), to an Australian mom on trial in *A Cry in the Dark* ('88).

During this career phase, Streep was "devoted to challenging the norms of female behavior," a "one-woman rehabilitation machine for a host of difficult women, rebels, mothers ambivalent toward their children, activists angry about government, ordinary women furious at their lot in the world," says Abramowitz (*Gun in Pocket*, 337). In metatexts that surrounded each of these films, she was uniformly lauded for her ability to "become" each character—supporting her categorization as an impersonator.

Streep's performance as a Polish Holocaust survivor in 1982's *Sophie's Choice* catapulted her into the ranks of superstar, garnering multiple awards—including her only Best Actress Oscar to date—and remaining on many "best of" lists to this day.[11] Reviews of her performance were almost rapturous, bolstering the hegemonic discourses about leading-lady Streep. For instance, *The New York Times'* Janet Maslin said: "In a role affording every opportunity for overstatement, she offers a performance of such measured intensity that the results are by turns exhilarating and heartbreaking."

However, the actress *was* beginning to attract vocal critics, whose readings of the star have been what Hall would describe as counter-hegemonic—either by disliking her acting style outright or by slamming certain things about the actress, such as her penchant for adopting accents. For instance, film writer Stephanie Zacharek has often been quite critical of Streep's work, but she confesses to having "mixed feelings" about the actress. She provides a negotiated reading (per Hall) of Streep's star image in a *Salon* blog, "My Love-Hate Relationship with Meryl Streep":

> We often have intense and conflicted personal responses to [stars]. That's what troubles me about the lockstep view of Meryl Streep as the consummate actor's actor, a performer who deserves our lifelong adulation simply because she works so hard at mastering accents. [. . .] But if, too much of the time, I find Streep predictably mannered and actressy, there are also times when I fully succumb to adoring her, when all my conflicted and annoyed feelings about her are temporarily erased.

Meanwhile, Streep's harshest detractors have read her in a completely oppositional way. For instance, *New York Times* critic Pauline Kael constantly harped on Streep's cerebral acting style; her observation in one review that Streep only acts "from the neck up" apparently cut the actress deeply, bothering her even years later (Anthony, Romney, Weinraub). And Camille Paglia, the outspoken "dissident feminist," offered a scathing critique of Streep in a 1992 essay. She derided Streep's label as "the best actress of her generation," describing Streep instead as

> a good, intelligent actress who has never given a great performance in her life. Her reputation is widely out of sync with her actual achievement.

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Cerebral Streep was the ideal high-WASP actress for the fast-track yuppie era, bright, slick, and self-conscious. [. . .] Meryl Streep, in the Protestant way, is stuck on words; she flashes clever accents as a mask for her deeper failures… (16).

At any rate, such criticisms of Streep seem to have been few and far between, impacting her image little if any. But what *did* greatly impact her career was the march of time; by the end of the decade, she was entering the "dreaded" age zone of 40-something.

4. Decline as she entered her 40s and took on comedic roles ('89-'92):

Suddenly, Hollywood producers were not considering Streep first as the leading lady. "Her career moves have less to do with choice than survival in the Hollywood marketplace. After all, Hollywood frightens and discards middle-aged actresses," said Bernard Weinraub in 1994, echoing the arguments of Friend, Seger, Stoddard and others about the age bias against women in the film industry. Though the SAG casting-data report did not debut until a decade later, there's little doubt that the number of available roles for over-40 actresses was just as dismal during this period, too.

Indeed, Streep watched plum roles in high-profile or quality projects go to younger actresses. For instance, in 1989, Michelle Pfeiffer (then 31) starred in *The Fabulous Baker Boys* and won a Best Actress Oscar for her role, while Annette Bening (also 31) wowed in *Valmont*; and in 1990, Demi Moore (then 28) starred in *Ghost*, while Mary McDonnell (38) appeared opposite Kevin Costner in the multiple-Oscar-winning *Dances with Wolves*.[12]

The normally upbeat Streep let slip her resentment and frustration in personal interviews and public speeches—telling the truth, yes, but certainly not endearing herself to the male studio heads. In a 1990 SAG speech, for instance, she noted that actresses over 40 "face the age police, who want to see your passport or driver's license" (qtd. in Abramowitz, *Gun in Pocket*, 335).

With few high-profile projects coming her way, Streep delved into the comedic genre—perhaps also to shake up her image as a "serious" actress. She made four comedies in a row, but the effort didn't pay off. In fact, two of the four films, *She-Devil* ('89) and *Death Becomes Her* ('92), were widely panned.[13] "She seemed heavy-handed, like the earnest teacher trying too hard to be amusing," says journalist Andrew Anthony. "Audiences either remained stony faced or at home. Suddenly, the leading actress of her generation was in danger of being a turn-off." Soon, however, she returned to dramatic material, which got her career back on an upward trajectory.

5. Resurgence as a mature actress cast in melodramas ('93-'06):

In this fifth stage, says Hollinger, "she played not tragic unconventional heroines, as she had earlier, but melodramatic, and much more conventional, maternal figures" (78). Her choices, no doubt, were once again limited by the restrictions placed by Hollywood upon aging actresses (Abramowitz, Stoddard). However, she did "strike it rich" with two roles that proved instrumental in her resurgence during this phase. First was 1994's *The River Wild*, a white-water-rafting thriller in which Streep convincingly played action heroine—at the age of 45. Streep, in a nod to her feminist side, said that one reason she took the role "was to show her three daughters that action heroes didn't

need to be named Arnie, Sly or Bruce" (Levitt). Besides earning decent reviews,[14] the film did quite well at the box office, with a worldwide gross of $94.2 million (Box Office Mojo).

Riding on this high, Streep received a personal call from Clint Eastwood, asking her to play Francesca in 1995's big-screen version of the best-selling book *The Bridges of Madison County*, which he was set to star in and direct.[15] While the book had described the character as a dark-haired Italian beauty (in the mold of Isabella Rossellini), and studio execs were auditioning 30-something actresses for the part, Eastwood said that Streep was his only choice. "For some reason, everybody early in the game thought that we should find a European gal for the part," he said in 1994. "I just didn't understand why. I felt they overlooked the potential of American actresses, and Meryl Streep is one of our most important" (qtd. in Weinraub). Clearly, he was both buying and selling her star image as a quality actress. And he was right: Streep's performance helped to make a critical success[16] out of the film, which brought in $182 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo). Her reviews, again, were quite flattering, reinforcing her star image (and boosting Eastwood's as well): "In a medley of bold and subtle gestures, Streep tells Francesca's plaintive story" (Corliss); "watching her build the character, being alternately nervous, flustered, comic and filled with yearning, underlines how lucky the film is to have her as one of its stars" (Turan).

Despite this success, however, Streep's roles in subsequent years were in low-budget or artsy films—such as *Marvin's Room* ('96), *One True Thing* ('98) and *The Hours* (2002)—where, notes Hollinger, she had been "typed as the queen of the contemporary tearjerker or woman's weepie" (79). In fact, Hollinger ends her

examination of Streep's career by proclaiming it "disheartening" to see the woman who started out so strong, choosing such interesting and progressive roles, concluding a career "rather disappointingly [. . .] with her typecast in a succession of melodramatic maternal roles of the sort conventionally allotted to older female stars" (79).

6. Re-emergence as a leading lady ('06-present):

It would be interesting to see what Hollinger has to say about the last half-decade in Streep's career, considering some of her highest points have been reached in these years, both critically and commercially. This period has seen her turn in three Oscar-nominated performances, in three completely different roles—Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*, Sister Aloysius in *Doubt*, and Julia Child in *Julie & Julia*—as well as starring in two huge hits, a musical and a romantic comedy.   "She's proving now, in a spectacularly attractive late middle age, that she can do effortless as well as strenuous, ensemble as well as star, and enjoy rather than hide behind her talent" (Haskell, "Finding Herself").

Plus, the star is eyeing a host of potential projects, and could appear in as many as four films in the coming couple of years. As always, these are interesting and diverse roles. Two scripts would have her follow form to play real people, including Margaret Thatcher—a role that is already bringing speculation of an Oscar nod (O'Neil). Other projects would be high-profile ventures: A drama, "Great Hope Springs,"[17] with director Mike Nichols (IMDb); a film adaptation of the Pulitzer- and Tony Award-winning play *August: Osage County*, with Streep playing mother to Julia Roberts (Vary); and the

comedy "Mommy & Me" with Streep and comedian Tina Fey as mother and daughter (Zeitchik).

Several factors have undoubtedly contributed to her sudden busyness. First, she is an empty-nester, and therefore more willing to be away from home for work. "She is now in a stage of her life where she feels carefree and less weighed down by responsibility," notes journalist David Gritten. Not only that, but she has expressed greater satisfaction with the parts being offered at this stage of her life: "I thought I was washed-up at 40. There were not a lot of interesting scripts. I could find one a year, maybe. Now I think that's changing a little bit. The good thing about getting older is that when they actually do cast you it's often something interesting" (qtd. in Palmer).

Hollywood producers clearly are finding Streep desirable (for reasons explained previously in this thesis). So much so, that some roles have been stretched quite a bit in order to accommodate the actress. For instance, the late-50s Streep was cast as the mid-40s Donna in *Mamma Mia!*—a decision defended by Director Phyllida Lloyd's anti-ageist argument:

> If you can have the greatest actress you can think of who also sings better
> than any actress you can think of, there are no excuses. What's your
> problem if you aren't trying to hunt her down? There is something
> eternally youthful about Meryl. I don't really think age was considered.
> (qtd. in Wloszczyna, "Streep Dresses Down")

Though *Mamma Mia!* received poor-to-middling reviews,[18] Streep's performance was mostly lauded, with comments such as: "Meryl Streep is a delight, a good singer, a wonderfully spontaneous comedian" (LaSalle); and "Meryl Streep, bless her graceful

presence and buoyant spirit, plays lusty joyfulness just as fearlessly as she has ever played tragedy or riveting drama" (Morgenstern). This kind of critical reception, as well as the film's mass appeal, certainly validates Lloyd's decision to cast Streep as Donna.

Still, there are plenty of other, more age-appropriate actresses who could have done justice to the role.[19] So, why has Streep become *the* go-to person for roles for women ages 40-ish and beyond? How has she managed to confound the intersecting oppressions of gender and age, winning plum roles over not only her peers, but also *younger* actresses?

In some ways it's because Streep has become the "poster child" of late-life success for female actresses. She represents a safe, acceptable, "universal" figure of older female stardom in our Western culture. And one major factor that cannot be overlooked is race. Feminist critics such as Collins, Crenshaw and Grillo would argue that it's Streep's middle-class *whiteness* that has allowed for the star's positioning as an archetype. Though this thesis does not aim to interrogate issues of race or class *per se*, it's important to mention these factors because, as Grillo notes, "race and class can never be just 'subtracted' because they are in ways inextricable from gender. The attempt to subtract race and class elevates white, middle-class experience into the norm, making it the prototypical experience" (19). And Hollywood definitely essentializes whiteness— and, to a great extent, middle-classness—in its storytelling processes. Unless a script specifically describes an ethnic or class scenario, everyone in the chain of command, from producers to casting directors, assumes that the characters and settings are white and middle-class—which is how the film is then articulated. Thus, the white, middle-class Streep can "stand in" for every "senior" actress. One can just hear the studio heads, upon

seeing a script that calls for a mid-40s to early-60s female character, pronouncing: "Get me Meryl Streep!"

Media professionals add to the discourse of Streep's desirability by talking about how carefree she seems, how relaxed, how great-looking, etc. For instance, A.O. Scott attributes Streep's appeal to her "playful, mischievous side, an anarchic impulse that, joined to her formidable timing and technique, has blossomed in the past 10 years or so" ("Unmistakable Streepness"). This image is a winning combination that makes her a role model for older *and* younger fans, endowing both groups with a sense of long-lived currency through her—"See how cool you can be in your 50s and 60s!" (more on this in the reception section).

Also, Streep's outlook on life now includes maturity and hindsight, and a sort of "oh, what the hell" attitude that comes across in a very delightful way—both in her personal appearances and in her characterizations on the screen. "She's not afraid to be mean or hated," notes film historian Jeanine Basinger. "She's not afraid to be unglamorous. She's more at ease with it. It looks like she's over the career part and just having fun with the roles. That energizes everything she's done" (qtd. in Abramowitz, "Streep's Got Legs").

Streep's acting prowess is well established; she doesn't have anything left to prove, so she has been empowered to take risks and make choices solely for her own gratification. And because of her box-office success, just about every viable script out there comes across her desk, hers for the picking. She can veer from strict nun to singing mom—and the critics be damned! because she trusts her instincts about what will touch a chord with filmgoers. More often than not, she picks roles with a mass appeal—raising

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her popularity even more, and allowing her to shrug off negative reviews. "I knew it would make lots of people happy," she said about *Mamma Mia!* "And you know, the reviews came out, and when the bad reviews came out, the blogosphere just exploded with women empowered to say, 'These people are crazy! What's the matter with you? Life-hating, life-sucking, desiccated old farts' " (qtd. in Abramowitz, "Remarkable Ms. Streep," 3).

Now that the star has been analyzed, we will turn to a deeper textual analysis of performance in the creation of the star image.

Analysis of Performance

"I like peeling away the surface ... Acting is my way of
Investigating human nature and having fun at the same time."
– Meryl Streep (qtd. in Romney)

Effect: Empathetic Resonance

Streep is almost fanatically dedicated to the craft of acting, spending hours and weeks on research or training to nail down each character she undertakes—to get under the character's skin, as it were. And "Streep does this," notes Tim Teeman, "endowing her characters with quirks beyond the script. Sometimes you cringe; most of the time the Meryl-isms feel right, stealing scenes, adding a layer, packing a punch."

In other words, Streep makes an impact on spectators. Exactly what that impact *is*, however, has left many journalists at a loss to describe:

> Brave is the person who tries to analyze what makes Streep's
>
> performances so remarkable. But Tony Kushner [. . .] gives it a whirl.
>
> "It's the ability to do two, three or four things at once. To create these

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moments of human behavior that are so layered and so deep that they're

ambivalent: confusion and contradiction, heartbreak and a lie, tragedy and

absurdity." (Luscombe)

Streep herself has given clues to her motivations and methods throughout her

career, offering first-person authorial metatexts on her work that have contributed to her

image as an "artiste." For instance:

The great gift of human beings is that we have the power of empathy, we

can all sense a mysterious connection to each other. I like to investigate

these different women to see what the commonality is with me. When I

get the script and read their story, I hear the 'ping!' that makes a

connection with my own life. ("In Her Own Words," MSO)

So, to hear her tell it, she aims to make empathetic connections through her art. Of

course, not everyone thinks she succeeds in this goal, as I have indicated elsewhere.

Streep's cerebral approach to acting has certainly been well documented, in what could

be seen as counter-hegemonic readings of the actress. Haskell, for instance, calls control

a "key word" with Streep: "It's what prevents us from warming to her, yet it's part of her

mystique. She's like someone acting in a glass house wired for sound: you see perfectly,

hear with crystal clarity, but you never quite 'feel' her" ("Hiding in the Spotlight," 50).

I do not agree. Rather, I favor the view espoused by Adams-Price et al.—that

Streep's performances tend to strike an emotional chord in audiences, which is a big

reason she is considered such a good actress. After all, as they point out: "When an actor

creates an emotional bond with the members of the audience, the experience of watching

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a film is likely to seem authentic, genuine, and effective" (104). The team examined

twelve of Streep's thirteen Oscar-nominated films in chronological order, for signs that

the actress achieved empathetic resonance in her performances, and their findings bear

out their thesis.

Affect: Acting Style

However, empathetic resonance doesn't just "happen." An actor must *create* that

emotional connection that transfers from the screen to the seat. This is accomplished

through specific acting methods and skills, which vary by performer. Notes Hollinger:

"The star-actress effectively creates her acting style, employing whatever techniques suit

her immediate purposes, and Meryl Streep has done just this" (94). Streep's acting style

can be broadly categorized under six basic themes. Here is a quick rundown,

synthesizing an analysis of each technique and the Adams-Price team's findings on

empathetic resonance. This will lay the groundwork for an original analysis of Streep's

three most recently Oscar-nominated films.

1. She does her homework.

This is where Streep's scrupulous preparation comes into play. For ***Music of the***

Heart ('99), she reportedly trained for weeks to learn the violin in order to portray real-

life music teacher Roberta Guaspari, who raised awareness and money for her struggling

inner-city school program through a concert at Carnegie Hall. "The success of the role

comes from Streep's ability to convey Guaspari's passions for music and teaching," say

Adams-Price et al. "Empathic resonance personalizes Guaspari's story" (104).

2. She connects with the character's interior.

Starting with Streep's success in making Joanna Kramer a sympathetic figure, she

has always "bored into the inner life of her characters," notes Rachel Abramowitz (*Gun*

in Pocket, 129).

A Cry in the Dark ('88) tells the true story of an Australian woman tried for

murdering her infant daughter, who was carried away by wild dingoes on a family

camping trip in the Outback. Streep says she prepared for the role of Lindy Chamberlain

by getting into the mind of the wrongly-accused woman: "There was no doubt in my

mind that she was innocent. And they did exonerate her, after the film. But because of

her manner, she was condemned. She wasn't the weeping, screaming, bereaved

mother—she was more like ''None'a your f---in' business how I feel!' '' (qtd. in Harris,

3). "Through empathic resonance," say Adams-Price et al., "Streep presents two

different sides of Lindy, allowing the audience to understand why some Australians

identified with Lindy's loss as a mother, while others reviled her, thinking her capable of

murder" (103).

3. She gets the outer details right.

Streep played real-life anti-nuclear activist Karen Silkwood in *Silkwood* ('83),

eliciting critical praise for her uncanny embodiment of the blue-collar worker, such as in

this review:

> The real Meryl Streep is immensely ladylike; Karen Silkwood was
>
> working class through and through. The skill of Meryl's film performance
>
> is that she is able to make the transition, to coarsen her behavior, even her

looks, to such an extent that there is only a passing physical resemblance

between her real self and her portrayal of Karen Silkwood. (Egginton)

This portrayal, says the Adams-Price team, also strikes a deep emotional chord:

The key scene occurs near the end of the movie when tests indicate that

Karen's home and all of her possessions are radioactive. [. . .] When the

audience relates to Karen's emotional breakdown, they understand

implicitly that her struggle against the nuclear plant is a human struggle.

(103)

4. She can make you care even for unlikeable characters.

In ***Postcards from the Edge*** ('90), pairing with Shirley MacLaine as her mother,

Streep plays Susanne Vale, a self-absorbed, has-been actress and drug addict—with

whom the audience does not immediately identify, the Adams-Price team contends. Yet

she manages to turn her character from a potential turn-off into a charmer, say critics:

"Suzanne is meant to be an overgrown adolescent feeding off her own anxieties, and

Streep gives her a comic radiance. She makes the character's flutteriness at once

poignant and immensely attractive, creating a new screen type: a soulful ditz"

(Gleiberman).

5. She lets her characters "unfold."

Sophie's Choice ('82), say Adams-Price et al., "could be the prototype for

empathetic resonance." Viewers quickly realize that Sophie is a broken woman, but

Streep only lets the truth out little by little: "Each new fact reveals more information

about her and better explains her suffering. [. . .] Streep lets the audience know

emotionally that there is more pain, more explanation to come" (101).   And this Oscar-winning performance elicited similar reactions from reviewers, such as *Chicago Sun-Times'* Roger Ebert: "Meryl Streep is a wonder as Sophie. [. . .] There is hardly an emotion that Streep doesn't touch in this movie, and yet we're never aware of her straining. This is one of the most astonishing and yet one of the most unaffected and natural performances I can imagine."

6. She does a lot with a little.

In *The Deer Hunter* ('78), Streep's tiny supporting role is a significant one. She was nominated as supporting actress mostly on the strength of her scene with Robert DeNiro near the film's end, which the Adams-Price team sees as emotionally resonant: "The audience senses Linda's nervousness and uncertainty. The tentative frame of mind created in the scene permeates the remainder of the film" (101).

Analysis of Effect and Affect

Having laid out the pertinent theories, this thesis will now analyze Streep's three most recent Oscar-nominated performances in detail, looking at affect and effect, as well as contextual elements such as film texts (plot, script) and metatexts (reviews, DVD extras, etc.).

THE DEVIL WEARS PRADA (2006; David Frankel, dir.)

Streep's role of fashion magazine editor Miranda Priestly easily could have descended into camp in a lesser actress's hands. Instead, critics lauded her for her subtlety. "Streep's quietly ironic performance, with just a suggestion of vulnerability, was

beautifully restrained," said Andrew Anthony. "Somehow, she turned a sadistic career bitch into a human being."

The film, based on a best-selling "chick lit" novel, concerns the travails of aspiring journalist Andrea ("Andy") Sachs, whose internship for the controlling and demanding Priestly provides many lessons in work and life. At first intimidated by her imperious boss, Andy soon comes to admire her, emulate her, and work like a dog to please her—only to ultimately be disillusioned by Miranda's workaholic and ruthless nature.

In typical style, Streep was not content to portray the one-dimensional "villainess" depicted in the book. To prepare for the role, she worked with the director and screenwriter Aline Brosh McKenna to define Miranda's motivations and actions in ways that would work for the film and make Andy's arc more believable. The principles provide metatextual discussion of this process in the DVD extra *The Trip to the Big Screen*. First, they say, they wanted to bring a sense of respect for the fashion industry, and how seriously its players take it. But, more importantly, they needed to make Miranda a character that viewers could feel at least a touch of empathy for. For instance, Frankel observes that in the book, Miranda is mean and demanding, but not very "seductive": "Meryl really understood how important it was for the character to seduce, and not just criticize and not just demand." And, says McKenna, Streep wanted to play "a real, formidable woman who has been successful and what that means."

Critics sure seemed to agree with this encoding of Streep's character.[20] Even with quibbles about the film's merit, comments about Streep's performance were almost universally flattering, such as:

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Streep's every gesture says that fashion is a multibillion-dollar business in

which civility (except when directed at the famous) has become a

disposable luxury. Miranda is a calculating monster—she has excised any

remaining trace of softness from her temperament—but she understands

her role in fashion so acutely that you can't make fun of her. In all, this

has to be the most devastating boss-lady performance in the history of

cinema. (Denby)

A couple of scenes in the film are usually cited in regards to the "humanizing" of

Streep's unlikeable character—most notably when, while in Paris with Andy to cover the

big fashion shows, a disheveled and red-eyed Miranda admits to Andy that her husband

has just left her. Streep lets Andy (and the viewer) get a brief glimpse of a heartbroken

and vulnerable woman, before quickly returning to the steely resolve that is her normal

persona. This scene is crucial to building emotional resonance, because it lets the

audience feel some sympathy for Miranda and see her predicament as a powerful woman

trying to blend career with a family—while it also lays the groundwork for the climactic

scene in which Andy realizes just how ruthless and career-driven Miranda really is.

Through empathetic resonance, viewers feel just as disappointed as Andy, and they cheer

her decision to quit the job.

In the climax, Andy and Miranda are riding together in a limo, headed to the

airport to return to the United States, and Andy confronts Miranda over her betrayal of

her loyal art director, Nigel (Stanley Tucci), in the service of her own career

advancement. While Andy is outraged at her boss's actions, Miranda puts her down with

withering observations about the price of success: "You chose to get ahead. You want

this life, those choices are necessary." When Andy counters, "What if I don't want to live the way you live?" Miranda replies, "Oh don't be ridiculous, Andrea: Everybody wants this. Everybody wants to be us."

An anecdote about this scene in the DVD extra *The Trip to the Big Screen* reveals Streep's ability to deeply understand her characters. McKenna says that she originally wrote the line as "Everybody wants to be me." But, as she recalls: "Meryl said, 'I don't think that's right, because I actually don't think Miranda is very vain.' Which is true—I don't think that Miranda has a sense that 'it's about me,' I think that Miranda has a sense that 'it's about this world.' Then when we got to the final read-through, and Meryl said, 'Everyone want to be us,' I said, 'That's it; you nailed it. That's it.' "

DOUBT ('08; John Patrick Shanley, dir.)

Again proving her incredible versatility, Streep plunged into a project to bring Shanley's award-winning stage play to the big screen. She was tapped to play the crucial role of Sister Aloysius, the stern principal of a convent school in the early 1960s, who comes to suspect a charismatic teacher, Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), of molesting a male student, setting off a battle of wills between the two, with naïve young Sister James (Amy Adams) caught in the middle. The film, says journalist James Mottram, is "a meditation on morality, faith and guilt, with the question of Flynn's innocence hanging over the film, it's designed to leave you in, well, doubt."

Shanley, who could have chosen any number of powerful actresses, set his sights on Streep, because, he said: "If you walked out on the street here and asked ten people who should play that part, they would have said Meryl. It's sort of a no-brainer. She is

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the person for the part" (qtd. in Wloszczyna, "Doubt"). His choice paid off, as most

reviewers raved about the film and Streep's Oscar-bait performance.[21]

Right from the start, Sister Aloysius is a fearsome figure, walking down the

church aisle during Mass, whacking heads and hissing "straighten up!" to wayward

youngsters. "The students are terrified of you," Sister James tells her at one point. To

which, the older nun simply replies, "That is as it should be." And yet, there are

redeeming qualities to the character, which is crucial for establishing a truly involving

conflict between the nun and the priest. These qualities don't come tumbling out, though;

instead they unfold in little bits. "You feel you know this nun and are drawn to her,

despite her prickliness; Streep lets us see hints of a different woman, carefully buried"

(Macdonald).

The script and Streep's performance certainly create a highly complex, at times

unlikeable, character. The key to the portrayal, for Streep, was in finding the character

traits that lie under the nun's prickly exterior. Small scenes, such as her kindness and

consideration for an elderly, almost-blind nun, or her revelation that she was a war widow

before taking the habit, reveal a woman with an actual heart. Streep has said that her

performance was informed by Sister Aloysius' basic motivation—the well-being of the

kids and the church: "She has found that it's most effective to keep to the strictures of the

church, to keep to the dictates of her faith, to keep children in line, to keep the school

running, to toe a very hard line, and to make it right, clear, exactly what is expected" (qtd.

in Mottram). However, there are also subtle indications throughout the film that the

sister's motivations might *not* necessarily be so altruistic. Her dislike of Father Flynn

and disapproval of his unconventional approach to his job (such as his sermons that

discuss secular concepts like doubt and gossip) become quickly apparent, as does her frustration over the direction toward modernism that the church is taking. Because the viewers have come to understand these things about the character, their emotional "stake" in the story is heightened.

Without any real proof, Sister Aloysius maintains that Father Flynn's attention to the boy is motivated by something more than simple compassion, as he insists. After she bluffs him into resigning by claiming to have checked up on his past church assignments, she sternly tells him, "I have no sympathy for you; I know you are invulnerable to true regret." This steely resolve is what the spectator has come to expect from the character, understanding her motives through empathetic resonance, while not necessarily believing what she believes. But then the actress delivers her sucker punch with the film's final lines, uttered by a distraught Sister Aloysius: "I have doubts. I have such doubts." Although rather abruptly delivered, this admission still strikes a chord with anyone who ever second-guessed a firm conviction.

JULIE & JULIA ('09; Nora Ephron, dir.)

Of two strong performances in 2009,[22] this was this one that earned Streep an astounding sixteenth Academy Award nomination. Once again, Streep tackled a real-life character; but this time, it was a larger-than-life character, namely Julia Child. According to reports, Streep immersed herself in Child-ology—reading Child's books and watching clips of her cooking show *The French Chef* during breaks in filming—in order to master the master chef.   And she came up with an uncanny impersonation, perfectly capturing Child's voice, cadences and awkward body movements—which many critics singled out

for particular praise. "The main reason the Child half of *Julie & Julia* soars is that Streep so fully inhabits the woman," notes reviewer Sean Means. "Streep not only mimics the lilt of Child's sing-song voice, but also captures the joie de vivre with which Child attacked obstacles."

The film, written and directed by Ephron, is a mash-up of two books—Child's memoir *My Life in France*; and the memoir of food blogger Julie Powell (Amy Adams), who in one year cooked her way through Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. The film intercuts between the two women's stories, drawing parallels between their lives. However, many critics found the "Julia" portion of the film to be far more satisfying—thanks in large part to Streep's bravura performance.[23] In fact, critics couldn't heap enough kudos upon her:

> Everything you've ever liked about Meryl Streep's invention, spontaneity
> and inspired silliness—and everything you may have ever loved about
> Julia Child's joy of life and singular eccentricity—come together in
> Streep's performance as the great American chef. (LaSalle)

> Streep [. . .] has found the ideal match for her outsized talents, and digs
> into the challenge with undiluted glee. She makes Child simultaneously
> comic and poignant [. . .] Streep is the most important ingredient in this
> recipe. It's thanks to her you'll walk away satisfied, while simultaneously
> hungry for more. (Weitzman)

The comic aspects of Streep's performance certainly help lift the film, creating much affection in the viewer for the character of Julia. Child's joie de vivre is amusingly

captured in scene after scene—such as chopping a mountain of onions in order to show up the arrogant men in her Cordon Bleu cooking class; or happily serving a gourmet meal during boisterous dinner parties with her diplomat husband, Paul (Stanley Tucci); or gamely handling rejection after rejection during the many years it took to get the 1961 cookbook published.

But it's the moments of poignancy that bestow a deeper level of empathetic resonance to the film. These moments are small, but impactful, and they spring—once again—from the creativity and insight of the actress:

> Streep was surprised to discover that Child had no children. "But then I found out that her sister Dorothy did have children and I thought to myself, what would that be like?" There is a piercing moment in the film when Julia receives news of her sister's new baby and cries with joy and also sadness for herself. Streep says, "There are big expectations a woman has for her life. All the script said was 'I'm so happy.' I thought, 'Let's see how happy she is.' " (Teeman)

Adding another layer of complexity to her performance, Streep is, in essence, playing *Julie Powell*'s idea of Julia Child—not ours or even, really, hers—according to the DVD extra *Secret Ingredient: Creating 'Julie & Julia.'* An important plot point is that Powell's idolization of Child helps get her through a troubled time in her life, as Child inspires her to embark and stay on the year-long culinary project, which turns Powell's life around. Her motto is, basically, WWJD—what would Julia do? Adams, as Julie, keeps saying things like, "I'm becoming a better person because of her," and "I wish I were more like her." Because the audience sees Child though Powell's admiring

eyes, optimism and good cheer dominate Streep's portrayal—which, of course, make the moments that reveal a vulnerable or sad Child that much more emotionally resonant.

PART THREE: RECEPTION OF TEXTS

Reception Theory

"Now, after almost 30 years of being perennially more admired than beloved,
the double Oscar winner has been connecting defiantly with the masses."
– Rachel Abramowitz ("Remarkable Ms. Streep," 1)

As a capitalist commodity, films are designed to provide a pleasurable experience for consumers so that they will want to come back for more (Friend). The pleasures derived involve a complex combination of factors in both production (e.g., narrative conventions, music and cinematography, and the use of popular stars in major roles) and consumption (e.g., familiarity with the source material, preference for certain genres, and adoration of certain stars).

Hall, Staiger and other reception theorists would remind us that viewers are active participants in this process, utilizing certain social and cultural competencies to interpret and react to the text in highly individualized ways. Recall Stokes' contention (135) that Hollywood-produced texts—stars as well as films—are multisemic (containing multiple possible meanings). Therefore, there are countless possible interpretations among the millions of moviegoers, making research of the audience a potentially daunting task. As a matter of practicality, the data must somehow be limited.

For star studies, focusing on the "fan" portion of the audience seems to provide enough fodder to formulate feasible arguments. Hollinger reminds us of the active and diverse nature of fan culture: "Fans are not passive dupes subject to the wholesale

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manipulation of the Hollywood industry; [. . .] fans use stars in unique and varied ways to serve their social and psychic purposes" (43). Indeed, says McDonald, moviegoers "bring many different social and cultural competencies to their understanding of a star's identity, so that the image will be interpreted in many different ways" (7).

The Internet has proven quite a boon to the discipline of fan studies, because it provides a public forum for people to talk about what interests them about a specific star. Needless to say, participants in fan and discussion boards tend to be much more invested—and outspoken—than your typical filmgoer (or your typical fan, for that matter!). They also tend to exhibit a higher level of cultural competency about a specific star or industry. Although these posters are, admittedly, a fraction of Streep's fandom, they can be considered a viable representative sampling, providing insight into moviegoers' thoughts and opinions about the actress and her work.

Before we talk about the specifics of this portion of Streep's audience, theories of reception should be further elucidated. While a detailed study of the cultural practice of reception is beyond the scope of this project, the concepts introduced in Chapter One are pertinent to this analysis.

Identification

Spectators have contradictory feelings toward Hollywood stars, says Stacey: "On the one hand, they value difference for taking them into a world in which their desires could potentially be fulfilled; on the other, they value similarity for enabling them to recognize qualities they already have" (128). Streep fans express both of these sentiments in their cyber posts about the star, who is a major role model for many of them.

As a role model, Streep may very well reinforce patriarchal norms, suggest

scholars such as Hollinger and Haskell, who have argued that her more "traditional"

qualities (like her devotion to family or choice of mostly mainstream roles) tend to

outweigh her "feminist" tendency to challenge ruling ideologies like the emphasis on

beauty or the expectation of meekness in women. Still, Streep *does* offer an alternative

form of star ideal (besides the typical sex kitten or vamp) that appeals to a broad range of

fans.

Recalling the various star identification fantasies that Stacey named—devotion,

adoration and worship (feelings of wonder about the star); and transcendence, aspiration

and inspiration (self-transformational and/or escapist fantasies of taking on the star's

identity)—we can easily detect a few of them in fan-generated paratexts that will be

examined below.

Currency

Stacey might say that one of the main ways that spectators identify with

characters or actors is through the ability to imagine themselves as that person or doing

those things. Recall that Hollywood producers choose to present youthful images the

vast majority of the time, by placing younger characters at the center of the action

(Friend, Stoddard, Scodari). When young spectators identify with or relate to these

characters, it gives them a sense of long-lived currency, while also forcing older viewers

"to relate nostalgically rather than in terms of their present and future lives" (Scodari, 5).

At the same time, these narrative conventions that privilege youthful characters also

prevent young viewers from learning to relate to older people. As Scodari observes:

"Young women are not trained by the culture to project into the future and identify with

older versions of themselves. The dearth of older women as adventurous, independent, romantic leads in Hollywood films is contributive" (87).

But when young viewers (both male and female) are presented with *positive* images of older female characters, they seem to react quite favorably. I reported on this fact in a recent paper[24] that studied an emerging character archetype, the aging action heroine, as embodied by the actresses Helen Mirren and Karen Allen in two big-budget franchises, *National Treasure: Book of Secrets* (2007) and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), respectively. My research uncovered a small but fervent fan base of young women so engaged by these characters that they have created works of original fan fiction and videos about the characters and their stories. Streep's sunny role in *Mamma Mia!* seems to have elicited a similar reaction.[25]

Streep, of course, has offered far-from-positive characterizations in recent years— such as Miranda in *The Devil Wears Prada* and Sister Aloysius in *Doubt*—so her popularity among younger (and, indeed, older!) viewers must have a deeper explanation. I suggest that it lies in her star image as a role model to be admired and emulated. Let's explore this further, by looking at some fan comments and reactions regarding various discourses about the star and her image, based on Hall's scheme of encoding and decoding of texts. These readings can be understood as dominant/preferred (adapting to or consistent with the dominant messages in the text; in this case, the star); oppositional/ resistant (contrary to the preferred meaning); and negotiated (a "mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements") (138).

The Audience

"my obsession started when i was about 10...
and i'm 18 now!! i'm a meryl-obsesser veteran!!!
-- Alexa Pace (Facebook fan page)[26]

Streep's Fans

It's a given that Streep's core fan base consists of female baby boomers and seniors. These viewers discovered her early on, and have stuck with her more or less ever since, returning in droves to enjoy her latest offerings. Says David Gritten: "Streep has once again become the actress of choice for a generation of film audiences in her own age range. Mostly these are women, who see her in an example of how to act one's age with not just grace but also intelligence, wit and exuberance."

Her middle-aged fans practically gush while expressing their admiration. A Facebook fan-page discussion—titled "What do you love most about Meryl Streep? That is aside from her acting"—elicited positive responses from women who look (on their profile pages) to be at least in their late-30s, such as:

> "I love that she carries herself with the graces of authenticity, feminine sensuality, humanity and a refined intellect -- truly beautiful, ageless and always engaging :]" (Tamara Keen, city unknown); and

> "BRAINS!!! She does not seem to be swayed by trends, she seems to remain true to herself without sneering at other peoples way of behaving. I have never seen her make a fool of herself or anyone else. She somehow makes me feel a great respect for her, an old-fashioned sweetheart of a human being" (Marta Riddell, who identifies herself as a grandmother from Montreal).

Such preferred readings of Streep reinforce her image as an authentic, intelligent, graceful person—qualities that these fans, no doubt, would like to believe that they too possess. The phrase "an old-fashioned sweetheart of a human being" also indicates that these fans have bought into Streep's persona of "ordinariness"—which, recall from McDonald's and Dyer's work, is a crucial component in star images.

Aside from her boomer base, Streep has also been able to win over young filmgoers. "She hasn't sold out; rather, she has lifted her young fans to an appreciation of what acting can be: what deep, abiding pleasures it offers, and how many endless insights into humanity," notes Ty Burr about her cross-generational appeal. "Young women are said to idolize her," says Haskell, "for an image of strength; for the 'chutzpah' of a by-no-means conventionally beautiful woman in seizing stardom (whatever she want to call it) and shaping it to her own specifications" ("Hiding in the Spotlight," 50).

Based on fan board comments, these younger Streep followers appear to have discovered the actress in one of two recent film roles—*The Devil Wears Prada* or *Mamma Mia!* Jane Buckingham, a marketing consultant and expert in youth culture, explains Streep's popularity among the younger sets: "We're all sort of looking for that mother figure that we wish we had when times are tough, especially Generation X, who didn't have the parents we wish we had" (qtd. in Abramowitz, "Streep's Got Legs"). A post on the Meryl Streep IMDb page titled "I'm 16 years old, and I LOVE HER!" is indicative of such fans, with these entries (one from the original poster and one response):

> She's just incredible! Just an amazing actress, i love her in the movies
> "Kramer VS Kramer," "Sophie's Choice," "Doubt" "The Devil wears

Prada," "Death Becomes Her" "The Hours," "Its Complicated," "Julie and

Julia" and of course "Mamma Mia." What are your favourite movies of

hers? (xrachelpx-622-405288)

I'm 16 too and I just love Meryl's versatility as an actress and how down

to earth and funny she seems in real life! My fav movies of hers are The

Bridges of Madison County, Kramer vs Kramer, One True Thing, Mamma

Mia, Julie & Julia and It's Complicated. But I just love all her movies in

general though! :) (hannah-1234)

Though these young posters seem to relate most to Streep as an actress by focusing on

her films, their readings of the star fall into the preferred category, with their enthusiasm

indicating that they will be likely continue to be Streep fans into the future—thereby

boosting Streep's potential for even more career longevity. The second fan also

comments on Streep's perceived real-life persona as "down to earth and funny," which

are qualities that would also be desirable in the mother figure that Buckingham says these

fans are looking for.

But it's not just women—young and old—who declare their devotion to Streep.

There are men who are unabashed fans, too. These include Facebook posters Tiberius

Stanescu, a young man from Toronto who says that "She is the most amazing singer,

loved Mamma Mia, beside being a beautiful strong woman-so sensitive and gracious. my

favorite actress. would I ever have the chance to meet her?"; and 40-year old Marc

Miltenburg, also of Toronto, whose post reads: "When I saw Out Of Africa, I fell in love

with Meryl and Africa. In fact, that movie inspired me to go to S Africa finally.....Love

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Meryl, and her movies. 'That's all.'"; and New York City teenager James Addison, who declares: "I really and truly love Meryl, not in any kind of wierd or sex-related kind of way- I seriously love her with all my heart. Everything she touches is gold and every interview I see I am struck by her charm. She's simply amazing!" These postings reveal attitudes that are consistent with the encoded messages on Streep's image, especially regarding her abilities as a performer. But there are also signs of adoration, with a fantasy of "meeting her"; and of inspiration, with one man even going so far as to go the South Africa after seeing her film (a direct case of the Streep Effect!).

The teenager's comment above about loving Meryl, but not in a "weird" way, is noteworthy. This is an extremely hegemonic statement, because it reflects the cultural norm that forbids younger man/older woman pairings, but it also reinforces that norm because he felt the need to mention it in the first place! Another young man, an Australian named "jgrayson_au," actually admits in an IMDb post that he finds Streep sexually attractive, although he feels conflicted about it:

> A couple of mates and I (mostly my age, 29) were drinking the other night trying to figure out our limits in age. Who's the youngest girl we considered hot. There was general consensus that went to Dakota Fanning for youngest... though we all did feel a bit creepy about it. Regardless, Meryl Streep was my 'eldest' pick. Given that she's 61, I consider that either I'm really strange or she's got some really great genes.

This post is also interesting for what it reveals about their attitudes about the lowest limits of acceptable "hotness." Though young, yes, Fanning is now almost 17—well above the age of many young models who are presented in media texts as images of desirability.

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So, while the producers of culture are pushing one message—younger, younger, younger!—it seems that consumers actually have a different perception: One that favors *older* over younger! Of course, this contention cannot be supported with only one piece of data, but it is an interesting observation, nevertheless.

What *can* be supported are the connotations surrounding Streep's appearance these days, with Web posters of both genders commenting on how great she looks: "Meryl looks amazing for her age. <3 And she is totally natural which makes it even better" (hot_as_ice, on IMDb); and "I think that she is very talented and holds her beauty well. Looking great! I'm almost 40 and people think I'm in my early 20's...so God blessed us with the look of agelessness!" (Robert NoPressure Banes Jr., of Miami, on Facebook).   Again, these are preferred readings about the star's image and support her viability as a leading lady at this point in her life. The second poster's comments also reveal a sense of shared identity or "sameness" vis-à-vis looking ageless.

Some fans express a sense of worship for the star—as evidenced by an IMDb post by a young woman named x-MerylStreepaholic-x, who declares: "The woman is too amazing to be true :) its like Is sent her a letter saying how much she's helped me and how much I aspire to be like her, and she sent one back herself, I treasure that letter its in a frame :P I love her so much!!! Some call her Meryl Streep, I call her God." Or, as in this Facebook thread titled "Queen of Hollywood?" with the original post by a young woman named Malinda Margaret Gray:

> Is it just me or should
>
> Meryl Streep be crowned
>
> Queen of Hollywood

she is Amazing and isnt Fake like

Most. She uses her fame for the Best courses

she is absolutely Brillant and owns every

Character she plays

what a beutiful Talented Acctress.

Terms like "queen" or "God" reveal these fans' connection to the "extraordinary" side of Streep's image. The first poster also expresses a sense of wonder that such a star would bother to respond to her piece of fan mail. Such fans' aspirations to be "like" her reveal dominant readings that keep the star's firmament firmly in place.

Many of these fans also exhibit a high level of knowledge and cultural competency about the industry and the star system, as shown by this Facebook post by a young, Boston-based fan named Julie-Anne Whitney:

It is a bit strange how quickly and deeply we can all fall for a woman that we don't really know. I mean, we know what she wants us to know in interviews, books, movies, stage performances, etc. but that's only part of who she is; she's a wife, a mother, an aunt, a sister...and yet we all seem to FEEL as if we know her, like she's a part of our families.

But even as this fan cautions against thinking you "know" a star, she claims to "know" the other parts of Streep—wife, mother, etc.—which, of course, are also part of her star image. So, even those who realize it's all an illusion can still buy into the dominant ideologies behind it!

Some fan comments even echo arguments about Streep that I have been making throughout this thesis, such as the recognition that the actress is lately so in demand because of her recent box-office numbers:

> She had many factors: respect, talent, bankability, and popularity at an age where most actresses fade away. It's just math [. . .] Streep brings people to the movie theaters just by her name alone (like Mamma Mia!, people love seeing Streep having fun). Other actresses may have respect but they may not have bankability (and Hollywood is a business, afterall).
> (betweennowandthen, IMDb)

In defending Hollywood practices, though, this poster reveals a connotative reading that matches the denotative messages not only about Streep, ("respect," "talent," "popularity") but also about the industry as a whole ("bankability"). With such an attitude, it's unlikely that such a fan would express much outrage over the cultural biases that permeate the industry.

All in all, these fans[27] have bought into Streep's star image as an actress who deserves to be idolized for her intelligence, talent, wit, activism, choice of roles, and refusal to "sell out" to the Hollywood hype machine. A young woman, "Kaiser," who writes for a gossip site called Celebitchy, summed up the Streep mystique in a November 2009 post:

> Meryl is awesome, and her recent box office victories are really important for Hollywood and for women. Maybe I'm totally wrong about this, but I think Meryl is one of the few over-40 actresses who has a significant male fan base, too. My dad loves her. My mom loves her. I love her. She

brings generations together. Plus, she's just really cool and she's the best

actress to ever work in films. Bold statement, yes, but I stand by it.

This one posting reiterates all of the preferred messages contained in Streep's star image!

Streep's Critics

Of course, Meryl Streep is not everyone's cup of thespian tea. A certain number

of filmgoers agree with the critics such as Kael who say that her acting style is too

"cerebral," too hard to connect with emotionally. A lengthy IMDb thread titled "Most

over-rated actress ever?" debates this question, with some participants coming out pretty

harshly against the actress—such as the original poster, studentpro3, who says, "Never

liked her and never will"; or a user named damonstrongproductions, who declares,

"Streep is definitely overrated, and extremely annoying as well" *and* "Streep is getting

worse as the years pass. Retirement is calling her name loud and clear!" Clearly, these

are oppositional readings against the star and her image.

A few IMDb threads also discuss whether or not Streep has a tendency to act too

much "in her head"—a criticisms first leveled at her, apparently, by the legendary actress

Katharine Hepburn.[28] Several posters agree with this contention, such as:

My complaint are actors who 'think before they speak' for the sake of

doing so; when that happens it looks like they are trying to hard to be

natural. [. . .] Does it mean Streep is not a good actress? No. But it's

distracting. (SimplemindedSociety)

She can be very self-conscious in many, if not most of her performances.

She is both cerebral and flamboyant and her acting is, I think, a form of

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showing off. And, so far as "showing off" goes, she is just about the best

there is. But she is not a very visceral actress. She can pull off little

acting tricks that can often amaze, but I don't think she could ever be

convincingly sexy or scary on the screen. (MidnightCowboyGoHappy)

These negotiated readings offer some praise for Streep, by saying she's a good actress

and "can pull off little acting tricks that can often amaze," while also expressing the anti-

Streep sentiment that her acting style is too distracting or showy. It's doubtful that such

viewers would feel much empathetic resonance through Streep's performances (because

they would be too distracted by her acting to get "swept up" in the film); so I suspect that

these spectators are unlikely to be die-hard fans of actress.

Some filmgoers also complain about Streep's ubiquity of late, such as IMDb

posters who argue that "she is way too over used, she is a good actress, but there are other

actresses that are just as good" (EliKahn); and, "sometimes I wish she would leave some

room for the other great American actresses her age. lol. They have no hope if she's

always saying yes. It was funny when Bette Midler said, please leave some for the rest of

us." (Prom_Queen_Carrie). These readings also can be seen as negotiated, basically

supporting the actress but also criticizing her for being "greedy." But what's really

interesting is that these posters blame Streep, rather than the real culprit, Hollywood—

which limits the roles for older actresses so severely (per the SAG report) that someone

who stars in two a year is seen as hogging them! The entrenched biases in the film

industry, then, are not being challenged, only accepted as what "is."

Along those same lines, Streep has been accused of "selling out," by taking a big

paycheck in mainstream films: "With $8,000,000 salary for 'It's Complicated', we will

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never see her again in small independent films like 'Before and After'. She sold her soul for money and mediocre high-budget comedies about rich white people" (never1and, IMDb). This is definitely an oppositional reading of the actress, and seems to be one of the industry as well, since this poster appears to dislike mainstream Hollywood fare and prefer independent films. I would be curious to know, however, whether this poster would have a problem with a respected *male* star going for a project with a big-bucks paycheck! (Too bad we'll never know…)

Not surprisingly, there are very few outright Streep-haters in these online communities.[29] The vast majority support her, though there may be a quibble with some facet or other. But even those consumers seem to view her star persona positively, oftentimes adding a disclaimer to their particular critique that, while they don't like this or that about her, she herself is likable. In other words, these critics are usually complaining about Streep the actress, *not* Streep the star, and therefore are offering negotiated readings of the actress.

For more on this, a look at reception of her films is in order.

Reception of Streep's Films

In Parts One and Two, this thesis focused on professional reviews, and mostly positive ones at that, because of the function of media critics as authoritative surrogate consumers in the process of interpreting texts. Their influence has boosted Streep's star image, because the majority of film critics seem to evaluate her performances favorably most of the time. Now I'd like to consider spectators' roles in the process of reception. In keeping with Streep's reputation as a consummate actress, even her non-professional reviews tend to be flattering, thus falling into Hall's category of preferred readings of the

star and her image. But there are certainly oppositional and negotiated stances to be found, as well. In some cases, people did not like Streep's casting or her acting, but in others, they seemed to have more of a problem with plotlines or cinematic themes. In the latter case, perhaps part of the problem lies in a misalignment between Streep's star image and the ideologies expressed in the film texts. Let's briefly examine the audience's reactions to two particular films for further insights into Streep's star image.[30]

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY (1995, Clint Eastwood, dir.)

This romantic weepie, based on a highly panned but massively best-selling book, contains very traditional messages about family, gender roles, and extramarital love. In it, a *National Geographic* photographer named Robert Kincaid (Eastwood), while shooting Iowan bridges, meets a farmer's wife, Francesca Johnson (Streep), who is home alone for a long weekend, and the two embark on a brief but deep love affair. Robert wants Francesca to run away with him, but in the end she chooses to stay with her husband and children. Most filmgoers were blown away by Streep's embodiment of the Italian war bride, and swept up in the love story, while seeming not to question the central premise—that duty trumps love—very much. For instance, excerpts of IMDb reviews read:

> The film's overwhelming main strength is the casting of Meryl Streep. As Francesca she dissolves into the role. [. . .] She lifts the film - which does centre on themes which could appear trite in the wrong hands - to the level of profound piece of art. Her selflessness and devotion to her family, and tortured sense of divided loyalties are presented so powerfully, and so

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plausibly, that the final scene in the car at the end [. . .] pulls at your

emotions so hard you'd swear it was you who was making the decision.

(Jen_UK, England)

Meryl Streep is heartbreaking as a lonely woman surrounded by family...

We truly feel her pain and desperation... She fights with all the love, hope,

frustration and responsibility... She is someone whose dreams of coming

to America have not been fulfilled by the tedious reality of her life in

Winterset, Iowa... Her busy life is filled with details but has nothing that

truly excites her anymore... She is forever altered by a chance encounter..

Her emotional range is enormous and her laughter is as charged with

energy as her tears... But you never doubt the truth of what she's feeling...

(ironside, a man from Mexico)

These readings reveal a deep sense of empathetic resonance for Streep's character—from

both genders, proving that spectators are capable of identifying with screen images,

regardless of whether male or female, if they are powerfully and believably presented.

Other IMDb reviews reveal different kinds of readings, such as a British woman

named Sandra Small, who decodes the film's texts in a negotiated way, lauding Streep's

performance but taking issue with the "stereotypical" role of Francesca, as well as a main

theme:

The film's message is that romance can be deceptive, in that it misleads

women into mundane lives that bear no reality to what they have been

taught about it. But, women who crave romance, should demand it, and

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not be afraid to ask for it, or to admit to liking it for that matter. This is

what Francesca should have done with her husband.

It's a feminist stance (women should take control of their love lives) that is at odds with

Streep's image as a feminist, because the actress agreed to play such a passive woman—a

character far removed from those played earlier in her career, when she was "devoted to

challenging the norms of female behavior" (Abramowitz, *Gun in your Pocket*, 337). But

Streep's reputation for taking diverse roles overrides any likely conflict in perception of

her star image.

An American man, critic_w, also defends romance, but from another angle. He

calls *Bridges* "probably the worst so-called romance movie I have ever seen," yet

mentions nothing about the stars' performances. His oppositional reading, in part, says:

As a GUY who LOVES romance, please, PLEASE do not accept this

counterfeit tripe of an offering as real romance. Hollywood has gotten so

lazy as to toss us a scrap and expect us to gobble it up as fillet! A man who

asks a woman to leave her husband, and her kids who are "almost grown"

is thinking of himself. A REAL man, and REAL love would offer to do

whatever you wanted to make YOU happy. [. . .] THAT is romance. It's

not a 4-day teenage fling with older actors. It's no-matter-what, 'till the

end, 'till death do us part!

In dissing the film's characters and story, he reveals himself to be a traditional man who

would no doubt applaud Streep's long-lasting union, thereby endorsing the actress's star

image as a family woman. As would several other reviewers, whose oppositional

readings objected to the film's theme of adultery, including:

My biggest beef is with the story, itself, and the message it gives. Here we have a middle-aged bored housewife who's going through a midlife crisis and longs for some excitement. So what else is new? I'm middle-aged and I'd like some excitement, too, please. Enter our rugged traveling photographer, Clint Eastwood, and, a few screws later, our housefrau has now found the love of her eternal life????? Of course she's horny for him: he's exciting, adventurous, a deep-thinker, poetic - but very selfish and crappy family material. Meanwhile, her devoted husband of umpteen years, who is not abusive in any way and has stood by her through thick and thin takes the back seat because he's...well, boring. (Matthew Duren, San Francisco)

I'm sorry, but this movie, very simply, portrayed no grand romance. This was a woman who was married to a perfectly decent guy and who had kids. She cheated on her husband. End of story. Cheating is no romance, no matter the "sweetness" in which it is couched.   [. . .] Cheating on your husband is just NOT romantic. And staying with your husband and kids is no great sacrifice. This movie disgusted me. (LarissaEsq, New Jersey)

Interestingly, neither of these reviewers reads the film's ending positively (after all, Francesca does decide to stay with her husband); instead, they concentrate their wrath on the fact of the adultery. These readings, while opposing the film text, are actually supportive of the cultural hegemony that reifies marriage and outwardly condemns cheating (while secretly—or not so secretly—condoning it).

A few reviewers quibble with the casting, such as this post:

> Streep is a great American actress with tons of credentials. Eastwood has proven his worth in both acting and directing. Without naming anyone, I feel that several other male/female tandems could have made this movie "Great". As it stands I credit it with a respectable "6". Streep's italian accent was off the mark and once more she looks as much Italian as Katie Hepburn. Great love story for romantics, could have been a movie milestone with the right actors. (JANA-7, New Hampshire)

It's a negotiated reading that is hard to argue with, because not everyone is going to love the casting of every movie. I myself recall thinking, at the time they announced Streep for the role, that Isabella Rossellini would have been perfect, as she fit the book's description of the character perfectly. And I'm sure she would have done a great job (she's a fine actress); but I, too, was won over by Streep's portrayal.

But not everyone liked her performance; some found things like her accent or her mannerisms bothersome. Says a user named niborskaya: "This thing with the hands was really distracting, it was like she had two pigeons tied to them, they fluttered around throughout the movie, but not in an 'italian' way. More like a 'unwell Southern Belle' or 1950s East Village beatnik chick." This oppositional spectator may well have been too distracted by Streep's actions to become engrossed in the story and form a feeling of identification or empathetic resonance—hence the focus on Streep's physicality.

However, these kinds of complaints are few[31]—certainly not enough to threaten Streep's status as an acting icon. After all, as Williams would tell us, the hegemonic process allows for individual expression and small challenges to the status-quo in the

ongoing cultural negotiations and adjustments that work to normalize certain ideals and ideas as the "way it should be." And Streep "should" be an acting goddess. Period.

IT'S COMPLICATED (2009, Nancy Meyers, dir.)

In this major-studio rom-com, Streep's character, Jane Adler, is a successful late-50s divorcee who is being pursued by two men: her caddish ex-husband (Alec Baldwin) who dumped her for a younger woman and with whom she embarks on a torrid affair; and a nice-guy architect (Steve Martin) who is helping her design her dream kitchen. She is supposedly "torn" between the two men, but it's really never in question that she will eventually come to her senses, break off the affair, and choose Martin's character. The film received middling reviews, but audiences loved it enough to make it a certifiable hit.[32] Even though the movie features an attractive, desirable older woman in the lead role and contains "naughty" themes such as adultery and pot-smoking, it's really quite a traditional text in many ways, with predictable and comforting tropes and conventions. Many of the film's fans like it for these very conventions, while members of the target audience are also glad to find identifiable characters:

> Almost a ten for me. 53 year old male who prefers romantic comedy to action-adventure. This film had a wit and a appreciate of today's woman that made the film very slice of life for me. Beautiful scenes, hilarious wit and almost slapstick. This film is not for the prudish but is by no means obscene. Just great adult fare and Meryl Streep can now do anything. [. . .] (pickleb, U.S.)

I saw it and had a blast [. . .] I'm a senior citizen, having been married and divorced; I though Meyers did an extremely wonderful job at portraying all of the characters. [. . .] Thanks for giving us something besides blood, gore & vampires. We all walked out praising the movie and discussing the funny situations; it was refreshing to walk out of a moving feeling GOOD and laughing for a change. (alaskanana)

Yes, there are better films about middle-aged men and women coming of age [. . .] But I didn't go looking for such a film in "It's Complicated" — I went for good escapist fare. This is not a movie to see for original plotting, profound character studies, or philosophical questions. I enjoyed it for the cast — Meryl Streep (enough said) and Alec Baldwin, especially [. . .] As an overall story, it doesn't hold together very well, but sustains itself on delightful moments. (Adam Brown, California)

It's not complicated to understand why many middle-aged filmgoers would read the film in a preferred way, since there are so few screen images that bear any resemblance to them or their lives. The film offers several "non-mainstream" subjective positionings for these viewers: an older female protagonist who is desired by two very different men— one who questions the wisdom of having dumped her to marry a younger woman, and one who is gun-shy about relationships but is open to this new possibility for love. Even the third reviewer, who isn't very flattering about the film, lauds it for being feel-good "escapist fare."

In the IMDb reviews, Streep is widely lauded for her performance, and praised for choosing the role for its (mostly) positive representation of middle-aged romance:

> The cast here is one of the best ensemble works of the year. Meryl Streep is naturalistic and in top form showing her sexier side at 60. Streep shows that she can still create a character from scratch and make the woman as real as anyone walking down the streets of New York City. It's one of her funnier turns in years. (Clayton Davis, New Jersey)

> The movie was geared towards a more "mature" audience and struck a chord with me. It showed the issues with getting older, sometimes thinking there is always something better out there and coming to grips with mistakes. Dealing with what happens to your body as you age (I found Streep and Baldwin refreshingly not self-conscious about flaunting what they have). (mgallant-6, Canada)

Again, it's not hard to understand such positive reactions to seeing something that the spectator can relate to or identify with. And the preferred readings of the actress's performance help bolster her star image at this time in her life.

One viewer, an American named cliffgold-1, offers a negotiated reading of the film, lauding the acting and the enjoyable but predictable plot, but detecting a reverse "double-standard" in its treatment of the protagonist: "Writer/director Nancy Meyers hates philandering men. Fine. So why is Jane's character painted so sympathetically? She's doing the same thing to Agness that broke up her marriage and sent her into a 10-year skid." He does have a point: Most male adulterers (including Baldwin's character in

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this film) are presented in film texts in a very negative light (perhaps to reinforce the

prevailing pro-marriage ideology?)—*despite* the fact that Hollywood is well known as a

land of philanderers! In *It's Complicated*, Jane does feel some guilt over sleeping with

her ex and consults with her girlfriends and her shrink—who all blithely advise her to "go

for it." This plotline could be seen as counter-hegemonic, except for the fact that,

ultimately, Jane does the right thing and ends the affair. At any rate, Streep's star

persona as a family woman keeps her well above the fray regarding any flack over the

dubious moral choices of her character.

Despite its "deep" themes like adultery and loneliness, the film amounts to little

more than your typical mainstream Hollywood escapist fluff. And even though the

majority of fans seem to appreciate it just for that reason, there are numerous

oppositional readings from posters who detest the film on grounds that it is not "realistic"

or plausible:

> The lives of these people are shallow, materially abundant and
>
> extravagant. They are not forced to think on any level that might appear
>
> familiar with most people on the planet. These characters are all totally
>
> unconcerned with sordid reality and so live aimlessly in a world of
>
> Hollywood fantasy. (njmollo, London)

> The lifestyle depicted is one in which everything is perfect, especially the
>
> cast's complexions. There are no human imperfections depicted, unless
>
> you count lust. All the characters, with the partial exception of Meryl, are

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> stereotypes – people from Advertising land. In real life things are much more complicated. (Philby-3, Australia)

These readings could be seen as anti-Hollywood. One might assume that spectators such as this despise the typical mainstream Hollywood offering. Another poster, an Australian man named lukalele, gives the film one star and is similarly scathing in his assessment:

> They're all unconvincing, unrealistic, ultra-successful, perfect people with perfect lives. Even the situations they get themselves into are perfectly 'complicated' (damn that title), and you know it's all gonna come out perfectly in the end anyway. Don't expect any surprises here. I respect the filmmaker trying to present the romcom from a different angle (middle-age), but it quickly becomes as typical and predictable as the rest.

Elsewhere in his review, lukalele confesses to hating the rom-com genre and watching it only to please his girlfriend, so it's not surprising for someone so outside of the target audience to object to the film so vociferously. Still, if these products were less formulaic and more reflective of real life, they might be able to capture a whole new audience.

Other critics similarly find the characters (particularly Streep's) unappealing and their motivations unbelievable:

> The terrain of divorce and romantic/sexual love could be engaging and witty, with real adult dialog and intelligence, but Streep's Jane giggles like a little girl; she reacts to the men rather than be the agent of her life, and the male characters are like archetypes from a supermarket self help guide. There is nothing original or intelligent happening here. Instead it is replete

with Baby Boomer sentimentality, incomplete emotional development, and worst of all, lacks any dramatic sparkle. (ferdinand1932)

This movie is a chic flick that is custom-tailored to the insecurities of older women (obviously the target audience). It reduced Alec Baldwin's role to a woman's cliché about men, in that all it takes is one great lay and they fall in love. He isn't a person but rather a prop without a personality. The script is garbage written from a woman's point of view in that protagonist (Streep) shouldn't be accountable for any of her action. (grant-graham, U.S.)

These oppositional posters are rapping the Hollywood film industry for its tendency to offer only representations of privileged, white, heterosexual lifestyles—"reel" images that hardly match the realities of the vast majority of spectators! Even so, the very fact that the film breaks out of narrative conventions on age, by centering on older characters, does represent some sort of progress. Not to mention, it bolsters Streep's star image as a leading lady even at 60-something.

However, Streep's image as a feminist might have taken a bit of a beating over the role, if a post by a young American named Laurel is any indication:

Honestly this film reminded me of the kind of "women's movie" my mom and grandma liked -- 40s and 50s stuff, often starring heroines like Jennifer Jones or Lana Turner, as long-suffering mature ladies, going through various angst, and getting to fall in love with Rock Hudson or

Cary Grant. The settings and costumes were always very lavish, and those

films were a kind of fantasy outlet for ordinary homemakers of that era.

I guess I thought women, through feminism and jobs and the last

40 years had outgrown this stuff, but apparently not. "It's Complicated" is

a straight throwback to that sort of movie, with the addition of a bit of

humor, some pot smoking and nudity.

This reading could be seen as negotiated, for this viewer doesn't indicate that she didn't

enjoy the film exactly, just that she was disappointed in its anachronistic tropes. And

because of this, there seems to be no opportunity for her to relate to the onscreen

situations, so therefore no possibility of feeling long-lived currency vis-à-vis Streep's

character.

Also of note is this poster's perception of "mature ladies." Because of

Hollywood's longstanding ageism, the actresses mentioned—Jones and Turner—only

appeared as leading ladies until their early to mid-40s, much younger than Streep is

now.[33] Could this indicate that the limits of perceived "maturity" have been nudged

upward? And if so, then perhaps, if the script had been more original, this young poster's

reception might have been more positive toward its discourses on middle-aged romance.

…Just a thought.

But despite these quibbles with Streep's role or the film's themes, *It's

Complicated* seems to have added to Streep's image, not detracted from it. She remains

Hollywood's most highly regarded actress in her age group, with unparalleled prestige

and power to direct her career in any direction she chooses. Let us now consider the

wider cultural and industrial ramifications.

NOTES

[1] According to Streep, "I thought I wanted to be a singer or music major or something, but when I got to Vassar I realized how much math was involved, so … I moved on … and went into the drama department." (MSO).

[2] Streep's first Academy Award nomination came for her second big-screen effort—a supporting role in 1978's *The Deer Hunter*.

[3] As an actor, Streep is tied to both the theater and film industries; but this thesis is most concerned with her *film* career, so that is the industry under analysis.

[4] According to IMDb, *Mama's Boy* went straight to DVD, and received abysmal viewer reviews; while the relatively high-profile *Mad Money*, which co-starred Katie Holmes and Queen Latifah, had a worldwide take of only $26.4 million.

[5] Streep isn't far off. Recall that *Mamma Mia!* raked in $602.6 million worldwide ($112.7 million U.S.) on a $53 million production budget. *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (the film that she was referring to) cost $85 million to make, and brought in $160.4 million worldwide (but only $76 million in the U.S.), according to Box Office Mojo.

[6] Add the $324.4-million blockbuster *The Devil Wears Prada*, and that number is $1.21 billion!

[7] As part of its criteria, the magazine considered career box-office figures; Streep's, it says, is $3.1 billion.

[8] For instance, Roberts earned a reported $15 million-plus for her role in the $60 million, 2009 thriller *Duplicity*, but the film brought in a disappointing $40.6 million, according to IMDb. Even Sandra Bullock, whose asking price has risen drastically after her 2009 box-office smash films *The Proposal* and *The Blind Side* (for which she won a

Best Actress Oscar), put out a turkey that same year—the universally derided *All About Steve*, which grossed $33.8 million.

[9] Contrast this with Pomerantz's 2009 study of the ten most overpaid stars in Hollywood—with Will Farrell topping the list at a measly $3.29 return on investment. Because male stars are more highly compensated than females, this list had only one woman—Drew Barrymore, whose return on investment was $7.43.

[10] Take the career of Meg Ryan (now 49): After breaking through in 1989's *When Harry Met Sally* opposite Billy Crystal, she starred in a string of romantic comedies, including two huge hits with Tom Hanks—*Sleepless in Seattle* ('93) and *You've Got Mail* ('98)—before trying to "stretch" with roles in other genres such as action (1996's *Courage Under Fire;* 2000's *Proof of Life*) and thriller (*In the Cut,* '03). However, audiences did not seem to go for a different kind of Ryan; so, entering her 40s, she once again moved to romantic comedies—with dwindling success, having run smack into Hollywood's ageism regarding its female stars.

[11] For instance, her performance as Sophie is number three on *Premiere* magazine's 100 Greatest Performances of All Time.

[12] Not that all of these roles would necessarily have interested Streep; but just a half-decade earlier, all of these scripts would likely have passed her desk.

[13] On the Rotten Tomatoes website, which compiles professional reviews, *She-Devil* received a 41 percent "Tomatometer" rating for positive reviews; *Death Becomes Her* got a 53 percent rating.

[14] *River Wild* had a Tomatometer rating of 56 percent—just four points shy of the 60 percent needed for a "positive" rating on Rotten Tomatoes.

[15] Eastwood, fresh off his 1992 Best Picture Oscar-winner *Unforgiven* and the lead role in the 1993 action blockbuster *In the Line of Fire*, had seen his own cache rise in Hollywood, so he had considerable control over *The Bridges of Madison County*.

[16] *Bridges'* Tomatometer rating was an astounding 90 percent.

[17] These titles are not italicized because the films are in pre-production or development.

[18] *Mamma Mia!* received a Tomatometer of 53 percent.

[19] One actress who immediately comes to mind is Michelle Pfeiffer, who was in her late 40s when *Mamma Mia!* was filmed, and who proved her singing chops with her role in *The Fabulous Baker Boys*.

[20] Considering it was a big-studio romantic comedy—a genre that tends to garner less critical respect—*The Devi Wears Prada* won a decent 75 Tomatometer rating.

[21] *Doubt*'s Tomatometer rating was 78 percent.

[22] Her other well-received performance in 2009 was in the romantic comedy *It's Complicated*, one of two films in my section on reception analysis.

[23] *Julie & Julia* scored a 75 Tomatometer rating; but many of the "positive" reviewers cited the "Julia" half as by far their favorite.

[24] The paper, titled "The Adventure Continues: Aging Heroines (Finally) Join the Action," was written for my final project in Dr. Christine Scodari's Gender and Screen Cultures class in spring 2009.

[25] I do not intend to go into detail, but this statement is based on a cursory look at the website Fanfiction.net, which at this writing has 124 pieces entered under *Mamma Mia!*, a good portion of which have "Donna," Streep's character, in the title.

[26] Note that all of these fan postings are as originally written, without any corrections in grammar, spelling or punctuation—in keeping with the looser standards for this type of writing, as well as to give a better sense of the types of fans who are participating on these sites.

[27] Streep is also said to have a considerable fan base of gays and lesbians. However, my research did not yield any distinct gay fan groups or boards for the star, so I could not include any sort of analysis of these fans—though, of course, some of the comments that are mentioned throughout could very well be from gay or lesbian fans.

[28] According to the IMDb listing of Streep trivia, Hepburn's official biographer, A. Scott Berg, said the legendary actress claimed Streep was her least favorite modern actress onscreen. He quoted Hepburn as saying, "Click, click, click," referring to the wheels turning inside Streep's head.

[29] The reasons for this should be obvious. First, these are fan boards—especially the Facebook page—and so they don't tend to attract Streep-bashers. Also, people who don't like a particular star will seldom bother getting involved in these kinds of discussions in the first place.

[30] These reviews were all culled from the IMDb pages for the individual movies, which provided adequate representative samplings for my purposes.

[31] Of 167 reviews posted on the IMDb site, only 41 had a rating of five stars (out of ten) or fewer, with only six people giving it just one or two stars.

[32] *It's Complicated* had a 57 Tomatometer reading, not quite enough to make it qualify as "good" movie. Still audiences liked it well enough: On an $85 million budget, it brought in $219 million worldwide (IMDb, Box Office Mojo).

[33] Per IMDb pages for these individual stars, Jones' last major leading role was in 1962's *Tender Is the Night*, at age 43; and Tuner's was in 1966's *Madame X*, when she was 45.

CHAPTER THREE

CONCLUSION

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Streep "has that elusive 'presence' so few stars possess
—and only the camera can see."
– Cinematographer Freddie Francis (qtd. in Maychick, 121)

This thesis set out to answer a set of questions having to do with the Hollywood

film industry and its treatment of female actors, by conducting a star study of Meryl

Streep. Not only has Streep worked steadily for more than thirty years, but she has also

seen her popularity skyrocket in later middle age, while many of her contemporaries have

been cast aside. The primary question, then, is: How has Streep been able to break out of

hegemonic articulations of gender and aging that privilege youthful beauty, and therefore

put female stars at such a disadvantage within the capitalistic film industry? And,

secondly, what, if anything, is the cultural significance of Streep's late-life success?

Does it represent a true advancement for women, heralding a change in Hollywood

thinking and thus opening up more spaces for media representations of older women? Or

is Streep merely an anomaly within the well-entrenched patriarchal hegemony that still

places considerable restraints and constrictions on women in film?

The thesis has argued that Meryl Streep has a uniquely positioned star image,

built upon her renown as an actress, her intelligence, and her reputation as a devoted

family woman (Hollinger, Haskell, Abramowitz). These discourses exist about other

stars, of course, but none in exactly the same combination or yielding the same impact on a star's career. So, one aim of this project was to investigate the industrial, cultural and personal factors at play in the creation and maintenance of Meryl Streep, movie star. I examined her star persona, acting prowess, and career arc across three platforms of cultural studies—production, texts, and reception.

To summarize:

Streep is a member of the Hollywood film industry's star system (Dyer, McDonald). Because of patriarchal ideologies and economic imperatives, this system prioritizes youth and beauty in its female stars by centering most of the texts on young protagonists (Bartky, Haskell, Seger, Stoddard); but it allows for other iconic types as well, such as motherly or grandmotherly figures—though these tend to be marginalized within the system, and are often portrayed negatively as hags, crones, bitches, etc. (Goodman et. al, Stoddard). In her younger years, Streep was able to navigate this tricky landscape and develop a reputation built on her acting skills instead of her looks, by adopting the acting style of impersonator (Hollinger). Through her well-reviewed performances as well as her low-key, family-oriented personal life, Streep cemented her star image as a smart, witty, straight-talking, "regular" gal who just happens to be extraordinarily talented in her vocation. As she aged, this reputation helped carry her through some rocky years in her 40s and early 50s, before emerging stronger than ever in a string of films that were critical and/or popular hits, helped along by the backing of female studio executives during this phase.

Another asset to her career has been Streep's refusal to fall into the trap of typecasting. From the beginning, she has pursued a variety of parts in films big and

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small, diving into her roles with dedication and gusto, and creating an impressive roster

of truly remarkable screen characters. Her recent choices have been similarly diverse: a

lesbian New Yorker (*The Hours*); a free-spirited single mom (*Mamma Mia!*); a

judgmental nun (*Doubt*); TV chef Julia Child (*Julie & Julia*); a bitch-on-wheels editor

(*The Devil Wears Prada*); and a middle-aged divorcee (*It's Complicated*). These

performances have not only made Streep an unlikely sex symbol at age 61, but they also

have earned her a new group of fans: the children and grandchildren of the baby boomers

who comprise her biggest fan base (Abramowitz , Burr, Haskell). And, in attracting

younger generations of followers, Streep has ensured further career longevity.

More important, Streep's latest offerings have been extremely well received by

the general public, earning gobs of money, making her the most in-demand actress in her

peer group, and raising her asking price.

In Chapter One, I suggested that Streep's career arc has been from "character

actress" to "leading lady." Let me explain the logic of this claim. Recall that character

actors tend to be impersonators who play supporting roles in films, while lead actors are

personifiers who get top billing. As discussed in previous sections of this thesis, the

highest-earning years for most female stars are while they are still young and beautiful

enough to be cast in the narrowly-prescribed leading roles usually offered by Hollywood

storytelling conventions. These roles tend to be stereotypical and one-dimensional

(Seger, Stoddard),[1] though the stars gain considerable prestige and latitude with the

"leading lady" moniker. But when women grow older than the age range of these roles

(20s to 30s), they must begin accepting secondary or supporting parts, which typically are

"character" types such as feisty (or kooky) best friend, wise (or demanding) boss, loving

(or cruel) mother, dotty (or randy) grandmother, etc. So: They go from leading lady to character actress. However, Streep has always been known to go for roles that offer "character," even in her peak years (think of Sophie or Karen Silkwood), and she rarely settled for the simplistic scripts that exemplify mainstream Hollywood. But in recent years, she not only has been featured in significant secondary roles,[2] but also has taken the lead in big-budget Hollywood fare.

Arlene Schulman, a veteran actor and director, addresses this distinction in a Q&A blog on the website AllExperts. She claims that the separation between "character" and "lead" has slipped a bit in recent years, for both men *and* women:

> Recently a number of actors who might have been classed as character actors have been increasingly seen in leading roles. So the definitions are blurring and that's what makes it difficult to define. Actors like Dustin Hoffman, or Al Pacino, or Robert DeNiro, or Tom Hanks, or Stockard Channing or even the incredible Meryl Streep might easily have been relegated to character roles in earlier days; today they are clearly stars who play leading roles. But, in my opinion, they are still "character actors." They are not just pretty faces. They are actors who "become" the character, who change from film to film, who use their unique bodies and voices and the ability to take on characters in a complete way using body language, facial features, vocal characteristics.

Thus, Schulman agrees with my contention that Streep went from character actress to leading lady. (Though to be 100 percent accurate, she's still a character actress, too!)

And now we are back to the primary question: How was she able to make this unique transition? Part of the answer lies in the combination of her particular star image, her popularity with audiences, and the support of female executives in the studios. But there are other implications to consider, as well, having to do with cultural trends that could indicate that a major shift in Hollywood thinking is under way.

CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS

"The lack of good female parts for elderly women like me has two
good things about it. First, I get to spend a lot more time at home
with my children. And I've forgotten what the second good thing is."
– Meryl Streep ("In Her Own Words," MSO)

The Baby Boomer Impact

No discussion about Meryl Streep would be complete without a closer look at her core fan base, baby boomers. This massive chunk of consumers has been a huge influence on American culture since their births during the years 1946-'64. Karen Stoddard observes that in the 1960s and '70s—when the rallying cry of this generation of Americans was "Don't trust anyone over 30"—Hollywood films were targeted toward this big-spending demographic; and consequently, images of older people—particularly older women—virtually disappeared from the media.

But surprise! Boomers have gotten older. And, as Stoddard presciently noted in 1983, they have continued to influence popular culture: "As the postwar baby boom population moves through its life span, the commercial realities of an aging population may well make it profitable for filmmakers to turn their attention more toward the concerns and issues confronting that particular generation" (154).

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Indeed, that is exactly what is beginning to happen. David Gritten, explaining the box-office success of *It's Complicated*, says, "The baby-boomer generation is dictating its own rules as it gets older—in this case, living out the exquisite little secret that you can be 60 and still have a splendid sex life." Actor Steve Martin makes a similar argument: "The audience is getting older. And they have been ignored. I think there is a big audience for movies like this" (qtd. in Wlosczyna, "It's Complicated"). An IMDb post about *It's Complicated* by a fan, Mrs_Phoenix, bears this out:

> Just from an audience point of view I know older women who really loved and appreciated that film. An adult film that dealt with adult problems that wasn't alienating as some indie or arthouse films often are. Or silly and FX orientated as the more mainstream movies often are. [. . .] Personally I thoroughly enjoyed the movie. My sister and I went to see it and had a wonderful time.

So, expect to see more of these types of films coming to a big screen near you—and expect to see Meryl Streep in at least a few of them!

Promising Signs

But will there be *other* older actresses onscreen as well? This gets to the crux of the second primary question: Does Streep's recent success represent a true advancement for women, heralding a change in Hollywood thinking and thus opening up more spaces for media representations of older women?

Linda Seger, for one, believes that change is on the horizon, if not here already:

> There is no doubt that some change in the industry is inevitable. The industry is becoming more international, more multicultural, and more

technologically advanced. [. . .] Actresses demand better roles, audiences

respond favorably to more interesting women characters, and talented

women ask for a stronger voice in an industry whose audience is more

than 52 percent women. (xiv)

Leslie Bennetts argues that "Streep's success has forced Hollywood to consider a

startling hypothesis: If you make movies that actually interest women, they will buy

tickets to see them. 'She broke the glass ceiling of an older woman being a big star—it

has never, never happened before,' says Mike Nichols" (1).[3]

There are promising signs, to be sure. Just this past year, a half-dozen high-

profile films, including *It's Complicated*, have featured or will feature women in their 50s

and 60s. First there was the sci-fi action film *Avatar* (2009), the top-grossing movie of

all time,[4] in which Sigourney Weaver had a significant role as scientist/doctor Grace

Augustine. Though Weaver's character died in that movie, Internet gossip sites suggest

that Director James Cameron plans to bring her back in the sequel. In summer 2010, the

romantic comedy *Letters to Juliette*, starring Amanda Seyfried (who played Streep's

daughter in *Mamma Mia!*), featured Vanessa Redgrave in a touching role as a woman

searching for her first love. As of this writing (October 2010), two films are currently in

theaters: the multi-generational "chick flick" comedy *You Again* has Jamie Lee Curtis

and Sigourney Weaver one-upping each other as former high-school rivals; while Helen

Mirren gets to hold a big gun and toss off one-liners in the action thriller *RED*, about a

group of retired assassins. And opening soon (November 2010) is *Morning Glory*, with

Rachel McAdams as a morning news producer trying to manage her sparring co-anchors

Harrison Ford and Diane Keaton.

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Or Not?

Of course, none of these films (except *It's Complicated*) has featured an older woman as the *lead*. Instead, Hollywood producers seem to be more interested in giving their films some "insurance" by including older characters or by featuring a multi-generational storyline. Recall that "a studio rarely makes a film that it doesn't expect will succeed with at least two quadrants" of the audience (Friend, 4)—and one easy way to bring in the older quadrants is to put some weathered faces on the screen.

It seems that female stars are still victims of the intersecting oppressions of aging and gender that disadvantage all women so. But in actresses' case, the impact is even more acute because they make their living in a business that especially prioritizes youth. Even a star like Streep, who has managed to break out of narrow Hollywood definitions of desirable leading-lady material, cannot make good scripts appear out of thin air. She might get her choice of all the appropriate projects out there, sure—but that doesn't mean there are a ton of them to choose from.

The intransigence of the industry in creating more roles for older characters—especially women—is indeed troubling. Even though every study I found on gender and aging in Hollywood comes to the same conclusion—"We think the audience would enjoy older characters, particularly if they had meaningful roles" (Goodman et al.)—the SAG casting-data study has shown little change in hiring patterns over the past decade. The 2000 report contained a pointed statement aimed toward producers of film and television texts, delivered by Anne-Marie Johnson, chairwoman of SAG's affirmative action department: "We are very concerned with the lack of movement with regard to seniors." She also suggested that the aging baby boomers should be causing studio heads to

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reconsider their assumptions, because "there is going to be a drastic change in what the majority of the viewership wants to watch" within five years (qtd. in Kiefer). Clearly, Johnson was a little optimistic with her time frame.

Streep's Place

Still, it seems only logical that a shift in thinking *is* under way, because in Hollywood it's all about the bottom line: Whatever makes money, makes sense. And the baby boomer market is just too substantial for studios to shrug off the wants and needs of these consumers.

Meryl Streep seems to be on the forefront of a movement toward more screen representations of older women. But is she leading the way or just taking advantage of a set of circumstances that have worked in her favor? (She is a white baby boomer that has retained her star image, grown older gracefully, and has the backing of newly empowered female executives.) In many ways, Streep calls attention to a broken system, in which women pay a price for a) being women and b) being women who get older; and where screen images do not reflect real life. Moreover, since Streep is the only one among her peers who is a big star, perhaps she *is* just a "poster child" for the industry, someone that studio heads can point to and say, "See, we put older women in films; just look at Meryl Streep!"—and then merrily go about their business as usual. (In which case, the star's achievement would not be so much a glass ceiling for breaking as a glass jar for display!)

This theory gains weight when you consider that only a few female stars in former generations have managed to land significant roles into their senior years. Katharine Hepburn immediately comes to mind in this regard—carrying the comparisons between the actresses to yet another level. She starred in some very high-profile projects into her

70s, even winning awards at this stage in her life. Yet, film critic Burr points out some significant differences between these two stars:

> Hepburn [. . .] was still riding high as she entered her seventh decade with 1967's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and the following year's *The Lion in Winter*, for which she won her second and third Academy Awards. Even then, you could argue that Hepburn was but one factor in the commercial success of both films [. . .] and that her appeal was largely to older audiences. (Tellingly, Hepburn split her 1968 Oscar with Barbra Streisand.) These were conscious twilight performances, her Eleanor of Aquitaine in *Lion* especially raging against the dying of the light and the perfidy of kings. Streep, by contrast, seems to have entered her second childhood as an actress.

So, Streep seems to be enjoying a different kind of late-life career than those of previous female stars. The question still remains, though: Is she helping usher in a change, or is she just this generation's main exception within a broken system? In her lengthy profile on Streep, *Vanity Fair*'s Leslie Bennetts addresses this very question:

> When casting female roles, directors and producers have often applied a comically exaggerated double standard about age. With Streep now playing the ex-wife and current love interest of Alec Baldwin, who is actually nine years younger than she is, many observers have started wondering whether such old-fashioned biases are really changing in ways that will affect other actresses, or only in relation to Streep, who has always been *sui generis*." (3)

But Bennetts, too, seems to offer no clear-cut answer.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

I think there is a growing acceptance of the fact that
women actually make up 50 percent of the population.
And that women of our generation are an economic force.
– Actress Helen Mirren (qtd. in Collins, 2)

So, this thesis ends without having completely answered the second part of the primary question, whether Streep's recent success represent a true advancement for women, or whether she is merely an anomaly within the entrenched patriarchal system. But that is because there is no answer—yet. The effects upon the industry of Streep's success are still being played out, so it is far too soon to come to any definite conclusions; though the signs *are* promising. Thus, one clear avenue of continuing research is to look at what happens next. Within the next year, or five, or ten, *are* there more positive images onscreen of older women, and not just in secondary roles? If so, what kinds of reaction and reception do such films elicit? And what does this signify for the culture?

One possible study in this line of inquiry might be to look closely at encoded and decoded messages within films that come out featuring older women, for signs that a shift is under way regarding cultural notions on aging. Another scholar might take up a star study of someone who had a very different career trajectory than Streep's—perhaps a personifier such as the actress Julia Roberts, now 43, who is entering the age where her career could be severely impacted by a lack of offers for leading roles.

A separate line of research might focus on empirical data regarding the number of roles, the types of roles and/or the salaries for men and women in different age groups

over the last ten to twenty years. The SAG casting-data studies from 2000 to the present would provide a place to start. These statistics could be studied more closely, looking for patterns that indicate any shifts the industry may be undergoing. For instance, it might turn out to be that older women *do* gain ground, but at the expense of other under-represented groups.

Students fascinated by the character/lead actor dichotomy might study this further, by looking at case studies of both male and female stars to investigate whether the banishment from leading roles to supporting, "character" territory really does harm the careers of women more severely than men; and if so, to what extent.

A scholar interested in how younger generations are influencing cultural notions on aging could look at Streep's and other older actresses' young fans. Studies of fan-produced texts such as videos and fan fictions might reveal a surprising sense of long-lived currency these fans sense with regard to these idols, providing more ammunition for arguments in favor of increasing the screen representations of older characters.

Also, it would be useful to compare Streep's career with those of other actresses her age—another area of research that was beyond the scope of this project. I mentioned any number of stars who would make a good comparison; these include Keaton, Weaver, and perhaps an African-American star such as Angela Bassett, who operates under the triple intersecting oppressions of gender, age *and* race. Such a study might foster further understanding of Streep's achievements, or bring to light other issues faced by female actors in Hollywood.

In that same vein, a look at the U.S. star system vs. those in other countries, by comparing Streep to foreign actresses, would illuminate the differences in cultural

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attitudes about women and aging. For instance, the star system in England seems to treat its aging actresses better, by providing more opportunities for them on the big screen and small. How are actresses such as Helen Mirren and Judy Dench regarded in their country? What sorts of discourses surround their star images, and how do these compare or contrast to those about Streep?

These types of inquiries might shed more light on the ways in which U.S. cultural biases and assumptions continue to disadvantage all women, not just Hollywood stars—even now, in the modern and "advanced" twenty-first century. The intersecting oppressions of gender and aging are a blight on the culture, repressing and burdening fully half of the population with unsustainable inequalities. By looking at these issues under the lens of intersectionality, it has become apparent that their negative effects are not just cumulative—one piled on top of another—but multiplied and magnified. Not only that, they also are inseparable—meaning they cannot be dismantled individually, because, as Tina Grillo notes, "they mutually reinforce each other" (25). But we cannot begin to dismantle them until we see them, acknowledge them, and understand them.

For my part, I hope to have added to this ongoing discussion via my focused study on one particular star, Meryl Streep, whom I used as a sign of a cultural system that is long overdue for an overhaul. I chose this subject because, frankly, I have been a huge fan of hers. And I remain so, having come to an even greater admiration for her, Streep the person *and* Streep the star—who, after all, is just a woman trying to make it in her chosen profession. And when it comes right down to it, she has proven that she really *is* the best at what she does. The Meryl Streep Mystique continues.

NOTES

[1] However, these roles do tend to be more complex in small-budget or independent features. The highest-level stars (A and B Lists) are usually able to slip back and forth between mainstream roles, which keep their star wattage bright, and the more interesting parts in smaller films, which keep them challenged and energized.

[2] For instance, Miranda is as important a character in *The Devil Wears Prada* as is the lead, Andrea.

[3] While Nichols' claim could be debated (think of female stars during Hollywood's heyday of the 1940s-'60s, such as Joan Crawford, Jane Wyman and Bette Davis, not to mention Katherine Hepburn), it certainly holds true for the past thirty or so years.

[4] *Avatar* has taken in $2.77 billion (yes, billion!) worldwide, $770 million U.S.

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