

Stardom and Distinction: Sharon Stone and the Problem of Legitimacy

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Film reviews, star interviews and feature articles routinely present the Hollywood actress Sharon Stone as an incompetent and mannered performer put on display for the male gaze. From this estimation, the primary aim of this paper is to i) consider Sharon Stone's status as someone to look at, ii) examine Stone's bid for acting legitimacy and iii) demonstrate the ways in which review media shared an agenda as they tried to contain that bid. My point here is that although Sharon Stone made a conscious effort to take on challenging roles that would re-define her body as a site of performance rather than a site of erotic spectacle, a wide range of review publications that span media forms of quality and distinction continued to subjugate the performer to the controlling male gaze and devalue the accoutrements of femininity accordingly.

Feminist Debate and Development

In the 1970s, feminist theorists became increasingly interested in looking at notions of sexual difference in relation to film. Theorists combined semiotics and psychoanalytic theory in order to discuss the importance of subjectivity and sexual identity in the cinema. Since that time, much research has appeared discussing arguments about pornography and the body, questions around representations of femininity, the female spectator and the social subject. However, rather than try to outline the wide-ranging developments in feminist film theory as they relate to representations of women in the cinema, I will introduce key areas of feminist debate as they take issue with notions of feminine beauty, visual display and photogenic fortitude.

Psychoanalytic theorists such as Laura Mulvey assert that in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been organised around a split between the "active male" and the "passive female" as they are represented in narrative cinema. We are informed that the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure in such a way as to display strong visual and erotic impact (Mulvey, 1975: 27). In this same way, John Berger refers to a division between the ways in which "men act" and "women appear" (Berger, 1977:47). In spite of the fact that Mulvey was writing about classical Hollywood film language and Berger was writing about a much older tradition of European oil painting, the theories are remarkably similar in their emphasis on the structuring male gaze and the fascination posed by the female object (Feuer, 1999: 183).

While 1970s feminist theory called for the use of psychoanalytic theory as a "political weapon" for studying representations of women, the 1990s witnessed an increasing popularisation of specifically feminist-derived discourses of gender as feminist authors such as Susan Faludi, Jennifer Wicke and Naomi Wolf considered popular formations of sexuality and gender in contemporary culture (Faludi, 1992; Wicke, 1994; Wolf, 1990). According to these theorists, there has been a shift in feminist cultural criticism from a situation in which

feminists positioned themselves as outside of and against popular culture in a state of "passionate detachment," to one in which feminists have considered how different popular forms may privilege traditionally devalued feminine competencies such as fashion and beauty practices.

Although 1970s feminist film theorists argued that femininity was devalued because of its association with visibility and bodily display, more recent work on clothing, stardom and identity in the cinema argues that women's fashion offers an area in which the active gaze is not male, but female. Theorists such as Jackie Stacey, Stella Bruzzi and Rebecca Epstein find that glamorous images of female film stars are seen to offer a unique dialogue between the female image and the female spectator (Stacey, 1994; Bruzzi, 1997; Epstein, 2000). In this way, these authors oppose the position that psychoanalytic feminism takes with regard to the position of the female spectator as either a passive consumer or an object of erotic display. However, even though contemporary feminist thinkers are exploring the possibilities of a cultural politics that "draws on fashion and style to subvert sexual and gender identities," one might suggest that female film stars continue to be devalued in popular film discourses because of the somewhat ubiquitous association between visibility and bodily display (Cvetkovich, 1993: 168).

I will examine the popular reception of the Hollywood actress Sharon Stone due to the fact that Stone's star image can be seen to negotiate the common equation between female appearance and sexual display in the cinema. Sharon Stone went from being a virtual unknown playing vapid blonde sluts in the late 1980s to a *Playboy* centre-fold in 1990, and then from a mainstream sex star in a string of big-budget erotic thrillers in the early 1990s to the recipient of a Golden Globe award for her portrayal of a Los Vegas hooker in 1995. However, before I go on to look at the ways in which review media worked to circulate Sharon Stone's star image, it is necessary for me to offer a brief insight into the life of the performer.

Sharon Stone

Born in 1958, Sharon Stone grew up in Meadville, Pennsylvania. As a distinctly dark-haired teenager she bragged to her friends that she was going to replace Marilyn Monroe as cinema's greatest blonde bombshell. In 1975, at the age of 17, Stone entered the Miss Crawford County beauty pageant, and that same year, was put on the books of the Eileen Ford Model Agency. It was not the prospect of modelling that particularly excited Stone, but the fact that her idol Marilyn Monroe had been a model before becoming an iconic movie star. Marilyn Monroe jump-started her acting career by posing on the front cover of the first edition of *Playboy* and her "Golden Dreams" calendar photo was the magazine's first ever centrefold. The photo was taken in 1948 and had been used for several different calendars without creating any undue sensationalism. It was only in 1952 that the image became a major news story because Monroe had since become an important new Hollywood star (Dyer, 1986: 29). Sharon Stone idolised Monroe, her life and her career, and as such, she knew the risks and the rewards that a *Playboy* photo-shoot could create. By 1990, Stone had already taken her top off in three movies without causing a scandal in Hollywood or making an impression on its surrounding media discourses, so the actress chose to follow in the steps of the original playmate and pose naked for *Playboy*. The ten-page spread more than delivered what the cover-photograph of a dripping wet, bare-breasted Stone sucking on an ice cube promised - the actress was pictured scaling a narrow fire-escape ladder wearing nothing but high heels

and lace lingerie. The issue sold out and became a collector's item, and in significant respects, the photo-shoot set Sharon Stone on the path to soft-core notoriety.

Sharon Stone first stood in front of a movie camera in 1980 and by 1996 she was "the second biggest female box-office star in America" (Munn, 1997: ix). The actress spent eleven years playing Barbie doll roles and bland WASPs in a long line of forgettable films such as *Stardust Memories* (1980), *Cold Steel* (1987) *Action Jackson* (1988), *Above the Law* (1988) *Blood and Sand* (1989), *Beyond the Stars* (1989) *He Said, She Said* (1991) and *Diary of a Hitman* (1991). Stone's first big break came as the lethal killer woman in Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990), but it was the Dutch-born director's contemporary erotic thriller, *Basic Instinct* (1992) that catapulted the actress to international stardom. After A-list actresses such as Julia Roberts, Geena Davis, Demi Moore and Michelle Pfeiffer turned down the chance to play *Basic Instinct's* explicitly sexual, graphically naked and politically incorrect Catherine Tramell, Sharon Stone secured the role. In the film, Michael Douglas played Nick 'Shooter' Curran, a troubled detective who investigates the murder of a one-time rock star, and a then-largely unknown Sharon Stone played Catherine Tramell, the alluring and aggressive bisexual murder suspect with whom Nick Curran has a dangerous affair.

The actress was so successful in the role of Catherine Tramell that she became an overnight success and her subsequent career was constructed around this aggressively sexual, graphically naked and exquisitely glamorous persona. Sharon Stone's success is therefore attributed to her looks and particularly her supposed penchant for parts involving "lots of sex and acres of bare flesh"(Andrews, 1994: 78). Therefore, if one considers the ways in which Sharon Stone's star appeal is presumed to depend on her status as an erotic object coded for strong visual and erotic impact, then the popular reception of the actress is relevant to a debate over female appearance and sexual display in the cinema.

Performance as Display

In a recent article on the star system, Christine Geraghty attempts to create working definitions of stardom for film stars in the post-classical period (Geraghty, 2000). According to Geraghty, stardom can be thought of in distinct ways including categories such as the "star-as-celebrity" and what she terms the "star-as-performer." We are told that the term "star-as-celebrity" indicates someone whose fame rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of his or her work and who is famous for having a lifestyle. In opposition however, we are informed that the "star-as-performer" is defined by his or her work, drawing upon the element of performance as a demonstration of skills (Geraghty, 2000: 187). The "star-as-performer" is often associated with the high cultural values of theatrical performance, even when that performance takes place within the Hollywood film industry. Therefore, the more actors are known only for their performance, the more cultural capital and artistic value they are likely to be given.

According to Geraghty's work, one could conclude that Sharon Stone is situated within the "star-as-celebrity" category due to the fact that those institutions associated with Hollywood regularly focus on interdiscursive discourses, and because Stone herself often circulates outside of the screen space in a range of product advertisements, designer runways and haute couture shows. Stone commands attention as a celebrity despite failures at the box-office because the availability of personal information and glamorous images of the star are as important, if not more important, than the films in which she appears. However, rather than position Sharon Stone as a "star-as-celebrity," with all the artifice and celebrity detritus that

such a term embodies, I shall now turn to look at the ways in which review media negotiated Stone's bid for credibility through acting legitimacy, or what Geraghty terms "stardom-as-performance" (Geraghty, 2000).

While the claim to legitimacy depends upon the work of performance being put on display, Sharon Stone was often held up against respected female performers such as Meryl Streep and Susan Sarandon and critiqued for her own mode of star acting as personification. Work on the star system often makes a distinction between the theatrical ideal of impersonation (in which the actor disappears into the character) and star acting (which is effectively personification). Schools of acting (and audiences who subscribe to the notion of believability) value impersonation, the performance in which the actor is effaced. These naturalistic schools hold that physiognomy as well as technique must evaporate on stage. Personification holds less esteem because it is popularly understood as an actor playing himself or herself, is based on the coincidence of character and person and thought to require no acting in the traditional histrionic sense (Gaines and Herzog, 1990: 201).

One might suggest that Sharon Stone made a conscious effort to draw attention to the work of acting so that, in a reversal of the "star-as-celebrity" category, it is performance, work and cultural value, which are emphasised, not leisure, the superficial star image and the private sphere (Geraghty, 2000: 192). Therefore, in an attempt to mark her acting as work, and thus claim cultural value and artistic worth for her screen performances, Sharon Stone saw two avenues available to her; working with respected film artists and taking on demanding roles that worked to redefine her sex-symbol image. I shall pay particular attention to the popular reception of Sharon Stone's performance in Martin Scorsese's *Casino* (1995), not simply because the film provides an example of the actress seeking "social capital" through an association with a credible film director, but because the Hollywood foreign press association awarded the actress the Golden Globe for her role in the film. In this same way, I have chosen to pay particular attention to the ways in which review literature received Sharon Stone's performance in *Last Dance*, not merely as an example of the actress taking on a challenging role demanding heightened emotionalism over and above mere personification, but because the film was presented as the production that could cement Sharon Stone's reputation as a legitimate "star-as-performer" (Geraghty, 2000).

While Sharon Stone was often heard commenting on her performances in these films as deserving of the Oscar, review literature offered an alternative discourse by denigrating Sharon Stone's performances as poor acting through personification. From this perspective, it could be argued that in terms of the popular reception of the organised film industry, serious acting, or what Geraghty has termed the "star-as-performer" is synonymous with notions of performative authenticity and legitimacy, whereas stardom and the star phenomenon, or what Geraghty has termed the "star-as-celebrity" is vulnerable to associations of inauthenticity, visual display and superficiality (Geraghty, 2000). Although one could argue that this division is simplistic, the distinction is routinely deployed in review discourses, and is especially relevant to my research on the popular reception of Sharon Stone.

Martin Scorsese and the Case of Casino

Casino is based on Nicholas Pileggi's mob-land tragedy about the Las Vegas gambling industry in the 1970s. Sam "Ace" Rothstein is riding high as the front man for the Mafia's multi-billion dollar Las Vegas operation when the bosses send in the violent enforcer Nicky Santoro. De Niro plays Rothstein, the mob-backed Chicago bookie who runs the casino at the

Tangiers Hotel, whilst Pesci plays the hotheaded best friend Santoro. Sharon Stone plays the love interest and leading lady in the shape of Ginger McKenna, a prostitute and showgirl turned casino hustler moving in a world that obliges her to be the embodiment of male desire.

Martin Scorsese has received both critical and commercial success for over two decades with a range of films including *Mean Streets* (1973), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980) and more recently *Gangs of New York* (2002). With four Oscars and an equal number of Golden Globe nominations to his name, Scorsese is in the somewhat unique position of being a commercially successful and critically acclaimed Hollywood director. Scorsese is widely respected as a legitimate film artist, due in part to the fact that he often employs "method" actors who embody a realistic style of acting in order to embody conflict on screen. Therefore, one might suggest that Sharon Stone's work with the director could go towards situating the star performer as a serious actress worthy of cultural value and industry credibility.

With regard to Sharon Stone's bid for acting credibility then, it is relevant to draw on Pierre Bourdieu's influential study on what is termed "the economy of culture." Bourdieu argues that cultural life can be modelled by taking an "economist" approach in a way that treats all social relations as if they are economic (Bourdieu quoted in Hills, 2002). In this way we can see that people invest in knowledge (schooling), in culture (the general information about cultural artefacts absorbed as a by-product of daily life) and social contacts (a personal network of friends and acquaintances). Bourdieu suggests that different types of capital as well as "economic" capital (money) are unequally distributed across society and that the amounts of different capitals that we possess relate to our place in a class system (Hills, 2002: 46-47). According to Bourdieu, networking and connections in the form of friends, relations and associates can all bestow status. As such, I would suggest that Stone's working relationship with Martin Scorsese might be understood as a form of social capital from which the actress can generate artistic legitimacy and cultural value for her screen performances.

As the recipient of the Golden Globe award for her performance in a leading drama film, one might suggest that Hollywood has elevated Sharon Stone from the murky depths of star personification to the theatrical ideal of impersonation as a credible character actress. However, it is soon clear that review media continued to deride Sharon Stone's on-screen performances as nothing more than superficial star acting. In an article entitled "Holding her own with the Big Boys," *The New York Times* can be seen to consider Sharon Stone's quest for acting credibility. The publication makes reference to Martin Scorsese's earlier Mafia production, *Goodfellas* (1990), and applauds the director for re-uniting Robert De Niro and Joe Pesci in *Casino*. We are informed that it was the director himself who cast Stone in the role of Ginger McKenna, and as such, one might initially consider the casting as high praise for the star as Stone is seen to quite literally "hold her own" with these highly respected "method" actors. However, Scorsese does not applaud Stone's acting range or her ability to portray the essence of the Las Vegas showgirl in the same way that he is seen to applaud De Niro's realistic portrayal of the Chicago-bookie.

When Scorsese refers to Robert De Niro's role in the film we are told that "he has the ability to make an audience feel empathy for very difficult characters." (Thomas, 1996: 70) However, in contrast to his praise for De Niro as a character driven actor, we are then informed that Scorsese chose Sharon Stone for the role of Ginger McKenna based upon her physical appearance and superficial star presence. While Sharon Stone made a conscious effort to chose parts whereby any emphasis on her physical appearance would refer to a

source of meaning for the character that she was playing, the director informs *The New York Times* that he:

didn't decide [whether] she could act or not act based on her movies... It was her presence, and her look that seemed perfect for Vegas at the time, the way her face is structured, something about her eyes... You can believe that she is the most respected Hustler in Vegas. (Grimes, 1995: 19)

Casino was based on Pigelli's non-fiction work, and as such, there was in fact a "real life" Ginger McKenna to base the role upon. According to first hand accounts of the period, McKenna was understood as a mesmerising object of male desire, and because of this, Scorsese made it clear that whoever played the role needed to capture the physical beauty of this Las Vegas showgirl. Thus, irrespective of Stone's bid for acting credibility, review media continued to invest in Sharon Stone's performance as a source of visual pleasure for the male gaze. The director makes it clear that Scorsese cast Stone in the role based entirely on her physical appearance and surface attractiveness, and as such, the review article plays overtly upon Sharon Stone's status as someone to be looked at, as a trinket to be shown off and constantly watched. The first time that the viewer is introduced to Ginger, the character is coded with strong visual and erotic impact. De Niro's Ace Rothstein glimpses the showgirl on his security monitors and is in a position to control the structures of looking for his own desire and the desires of the male spectator. Therefore, the scene can be understood as a classic example of the active and controlling male gaze that awards the site of activity to the male while reducing the female figure to the passive status of the erotic object.

Casino is set in vintage Las Vegas, amongst the flashing surfaces and seductive backdrops of America's gaudiest playground. In this same way, Sharon Stone's performance as Ginger McKenna can be seen as a site of feminine extravagance, decorative glamour and vintage glitter. If Stone's gaudy performance is seen to reflect the superficial mid-desert location, then the actress could be applauded for an exceptional performance that serves the theme of the film. However, the fact that Sharon Stone was cast for her ability to present the two-dimensional surface attractiveness, rather than the inner essence of the character in question allows review media to dismiss the actress as a photogenic celebrity rather than elevate Stone as a serious actress for her necessarily seductive and vulgar performance in the film. Therefore, rather than champion Sharon Stone's performance as a necessary triumph of style and substance in line with the legitimate acting mode of impersonation, much review literature concluded that Sharon Stone was an extravagant and ephemeral star devoid of both acting talent and industry credibility. The review continues to deride Sharon Stone's role in the film as we are told that:

Sharon Stone landed the right part at the right time. Since catching the fancy of the public and the critics with *Basic Instinct*, she has wobbled, weaved and frittered away her capital in films like *Intersection*. Then out of the blue, came Ginger (Grimes, 1995: 17).

If one considers that Sharon Stone's principal commodity is sexual allure, then it is clear that the review publication critiques the actress for transcending her explicit, and hence her marketable star image by performing in a range of films that are far removed from the erotic thriller genre, using *Intersection* (1994) as a case in point (Clarke, 1995: 76). It is relevant to note that *Intersection* is a modern-day melodrama in which the actress transcends the aggressively sexual and deliberately glamorous portrayal of *Basic Instinct*'s Catherine

Tramell. In this way, the publication demonstrates Hollywood's investment in the actress as a sexual and more importantly, a superficial Hollywood star. The review can be seen to demarcate the sexual star performer from the serious actress in order to maintain the hierarchy of performances through notions of sexuality, legitimacy and performance in the cinema.

The New York Times continues to challenge Sharon Stone's bid for acting credibility through her performance in *Casino* as we are told that the actress is merely a celebrity in vogue, a beautiful flight of male fancy. In this way, the review seems to deride the actress as a fortunate performer who simply struck it lucky, rather than a legitimate working actress who can, like De Niro, mark her acting performances as work, and thus claim cultural value and artistic worth for her career. One could argue that the concept of striking it lucky with the right part at the right time is the obvious way in which unknown actors become star performers. From Julia Roberts to Meg Ryan, most actors on the A-list have become overnight success stories based on a single defining performance. In the case of Julia Roberts, her portrayal of the prostitute Vivian Ward in the hit film *Pretty Woman* (1990) shot her to international stardom, and likewise, Meg Ryan became an overnight success story after her portrayal of the romantic love interest Sally Albright in the successful *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). While performers such as Roberts and Ryan found fame as a low-rent prostitute and an orgasm scene-stealer respectively, the review article makes it clear that Sharon Stone should be critiqued for finding notoriety through her portrayal of *Basic Instinct's* predatory Catherine Tramell. There are clear value judgements at stake here because whilst numerous female performers seek public attention and industry credibility through the female inspired romantic comedy, Stone's success and subsequent critique was based entirely on her performance in the erotic thriller genre.

In order to explore the tension between the impact of review media on Scorsese's direction of Stone and Stone's own ability to perform, I find it necessary to introduce my own view concerning Stone's performance in the mobster film. It is not my intention here to take issue with the semiotic study of screen acting or to consider a methodological study of Sharon Stone's performance in line with John O. Thompson's "Communication Test," (Thompson, 1978: 183-197) but rather, to introduce the reader to my personal thoughts concerning Sharon Stone's observable projections of personality on screen. In *Casino*, Sharon Stone has to convince the viewer that she is the complicated and contradictory Ginger McKenna. Throughout the course of the narrative we see the character as a hustler and a wife, an abusive mother and a homemaker, a drug addict and a loyal friend respectively. My point here however is not to consider the authenticity of this character per se, but to consider how persuasively Sharon Stone can present these different aspects of the character convincingly.

When Stone first enters the frame as the beautiful hustler with a mesmerising smile, the shimmering clothes and the perfect smile go some way towards convincing me that Sharon Stone is Ginger McKenna. However, it is the way in which Stone presents Ginger as a mischievous and flamboyant personality beyond her surface appearance that I find most rewarding and convincing here. In this same way, when we see the character of Ginger in the depths of loneliness and depression, Sharon Stone's performance is equally believable. During the narrative we see the character have a child, get married and live an opulent and luxurious lifestyle befitting the most respected hustler in Las Vegas, and yet, Stone's ability to present this character in a state of total despair is awe-inspiring. Irrespective of the money, love and wealth being bestowed on the character by her husband, Ginger remains in love with her ex-pimp boyfriend. The point here is that it would be very easy to dismiss Ginger's

feelings for this unattractive card shark in the face of her comfortable life in Las Vegas, however, Stone's speech and physical behaviour make Ginger's love appear true, albeit tragic. I do not feel able to pin point an exact look, expressive gesture or physical movement that enables Sharon Stone to appear so convincingly as Ginger McKenna, but rather, would have to applaud her bitterly hard-edged performance for its ability to draw me into the life of the character.

As if acknowledging the depth and scale of Sharon Stone's performance as I have outlined above, *Sight and Sound* appears to praise the actress for her portrayal of Ginger McKenna. In an article entitled "Someone to Look at" we are told that: "Stone attacks the role with a voracious energy; her performance has a terrifying emotional range, from the snarl to the whimper." (Francke, 1996: 26) *Sight and Sound* emphasises Sharon Stone's heightened emotionalism and outbursts of expression, and as such, the publication presents the actress as a credible performer who can evoke the inner life of the character beyond the surface attractiveness and garish decoration that the depiction of the character necessitates. However, rather than go on to elevate the actress for her award-winning role we are informed that:

In a film in which material excess is a sign of corruption, Ginger is the spectacular, despicable, glistening, poisonous totem... Scorsese's film despises the femininity that Stone has worked so hard to give value to... the glamorous ghosts of female stars past. (Francke, 1996: 26)

The title of the article is in itself insightful. We are informed that Sharon Stone is neither a credible actress nor a legitimate Hollywood performer, but someone coded for strong visual and erotic display, be it for the structuring male gaze or for the female viewer as consumer. In the case of *Casino*, review media makes it very clear that the actress is put firmly on display by commenting on the ways in which her face and body are exhibited in a variety of hairstyles, outfits and degrees of nakedness throughout the film and in associated publicity. Therefore, although Sharon Stone made a conscious effort to take on a challenging role that would re-define her body as a site of performance, those institutions associated with Hollywood continued to subjugate the performer to the controlling male gaze and demote her star status accordingly.

Casino represented Sharon Stone's bid for acting credibility, and yet *The New York Times* overlooks Stone's ability to evoke the inner emotions of the character in favour of presenting the actress as a beautiful sight and a source of visual pleasure. The irony of this situation is not lost on James Naremore whose work on acting tells us that while serious acting and impersonation is articulated in terms of "essences" all audiences ever look at are the surfaces (Naremore, 1990: 212). Therefore, rather than elevate Sharon Stone for her ability to portray the Las Vegas showgirl through a combination of surface attractiveness and character-driven performance, I would draw upon Naremore's observation to suggest that all audiences and review publications alike, ever look at are the outward appearances.

Rather than reclaim Sharon Stone as a contemporary Hollywood film star reminiscent of a classical Hollywood age, or present Stone's appearance as serving the theme of the film, the publication informs us that Sharon Stone does not demonstrate the right kind of acting performance in this particular role. It is suggested that Stone's performance represents the site of superficial extravagance, not in a way that can be validated by canonised aspects of popular cinema or respectable feminine adornment, but in a way that derides the star actress for such abject triviality.

More newsprint went on analysing Stone's costume changes than on assessing her character-driven performance as Ginger McKenna, and as such, it is clear that review media positions Sharon Stone as nothing more than a celebrity clothes-horse. Stone is physically able to carry the extravagant clothes with a model poise in order to show the garments off to spectacular effect, rather than portraying the emotions and the motivations of the character in question. What is interesting here is that although the character of Ginger McKenna calls upon model poise and extravagant decoration as crucial feminine competencies, the actress is derided in the role as a false and culturally produced femininity. *The New York Times* distinguishes between a false, culturally produced image of femininity marked by female beauty and glamorous adornment and a more authentic image, which could only be released once the decorative trappings of femininity have been discarded. Like much second-wave rhetoric, the publication appears particularly aggressive towards the feminine ghetto of fashion, costume and beauty practices.

At the outset of this paper, I suggested that Sharon Stone made a conscious effort to appear in films that would work to redefine her sex-symbol image and generate artistic credibility for her on screen performances, with her role in *Casino* providing an opportunity to generate "social capital" and artistic worth due to her working relationship with Martin Scorsese. However, Sharon Stone's portrayal of the Las Vegas showgirl was not read as a legitimate artistic performance, but rather, her physical appearance and mode of personification were simply deemed fitting in the garish representation of 1970s Las Vegas. With such a critique in mind, I will now look at the popular reception of *Last Dance* in order to examine the ways in which review media negotiated Sharon Stone's bid for acting credibility through her role in that film.

Death Row Drama and the Case of Last Dance

Bruce Beresford's death row drama presents Sharon Stone in the role of Cindy Liggett, a crack-addicted killer facing execution for a brutal double-murder. The hour of her execution is fast approaching, and her only hope of escaping lethal injection rests with Rob Morrow's Rick Hayes, a young attorney petitioning clemency for the prisoner. I would suggest that the role of Cindy Liggett is a challenging one to play as the heroine is presented to the viewer as a disadvantaged child of an abusive home, who was exposed to sex and drugs at any early age. Sharon Stone shed her sexualised star image and her glamorous off-screen persona in a role that saw the actress take the character from the tough hard-bitten loser to the sensitive artist. From this estimation then, one might suggest that *Last Dance* was the film that was to generate artistic credibility for the actress. However, rather than focus on Sharon Stone's role in the film as an opportunity to generate industry respectability, review media points out that Sharon Stone's success as a trivial and beautiful star and the way in which she makes meaning for her role as the death-row inmate do not sit well together. In *Last Dance* Sharon Stone appears without makeup and other adornments of glamorous femininity, and as such, her performance in the film is not merely a contradictory image, it is a dysfunctional one for those review publications that have an investment in Sharon Stone's sex-symbol persona.

In the case of *Casino*, I offered my own views concerning Sharon Stone's acting performance in order to explore the tension between the ways in which review media present Sharon Stone on screen and Stone's own ability to perform. In this same way, I feel it necessary to present my own thoughts concerning Stone's performance in *Last Dance*. Irrespective of the fact that Sharon Stone is routinely dismissed for her star acting and mode of personification, I believe that the actress disappears into the challenging role of Cindy Liggett. I feel it necessary to

champion Stone's performance as a young drug addict with jet black hair and an even darker persona as raw and transfixing, and likewise, to applaud her performance as a more mature death-row inmate sharing time with other prisoners. I could introduce one of the most touching scenes in the film that comes when the character receives a dress that she can wear into the death chamber, and argue that as she unpacks the garment, the moment becomes very moving. However, even though I believe Stone's portrayal of Cindy Liggett to be an accomplished and convincing performance, the ways in which review media critiqued Stone's role in the film make it somewhat difficult to counter. The fact that Sharon Stone's face cannot help but carry traces of the beautiful Hollywood film star means that my own thoughts on the performance are seen in contrast to the popular reception of the star in this role. *The New York Times* states that the: "[t]he star, without makeup and with dirty hair hacked off and dyed reddish brown, tries looking as nondescript as she can: not very since she still looks like Sharon Stone." (Maslin, 1996) The publication makes it clear that although Sharon Stone is made-up to look like a death-row convict, the fact that the actress is often coded with strong visual and erotic impact means that the audience cannot get beyond seeing the actress in the traditional exhibitionist role. What is most interesting here is that in a review of a film in which Sharon Stone foregoes surface appearance in favour of the essence of the character, review publications continue to negotiate the performance through discourses of fashion, femininity and beauty practices. *Premiere* magazine can be seen to echo these sentiments as we are told that, "[e]ven though Sharon is playing white trash in a penitentiary, she still has subtle makeup and highlights -- maybe a gifted colourist is Sharon's last request." (Gelman-Wexler, 1996: 39)

If one considers that the feminist critique of fashion, style and costume was part of the wider critique of femininity during the second wave, then it is interesting to consider the ways in which review media focus on the fact that Sharon Stone is either wearing no make up, or made up to look like she was not wearing any. According to Elizabeth Wilson's work on fashion and modernity, the no makeup natural image can be understood as superior to the artificial construction of femininity. In this way, the natural image is associated with simplicity and trustfulness in contrast to the fashionable image of femininity, which is understood as artificial and corrupt (Wilson, 1985: 235). From this perspective, one might assume that Stone's natural looking performance was received as the site of an emotive and authentic character portrayal and endorsed as an "attack" on the artificial beauty myth that objectifies women. However, rather than authenticate Sharon Stone's made-to-look-natural performance, the aforementioned publications point to the constructed and hence the inauthentic nature of such seemingly natural femininity. According to the fashion and beauty pages in women's magazines, the natural look is something which must be achieved: intensive skin care is demanded for a "natural" complexion and applying a range of products such as tinted moisturisers, brown mascara and "barely there" lip colour are demanded for a "natural look." In their research on fashion, representation and femininity, Evans and Thornton have argued that the "natural" look took as much labour as all other feminine fashions, and that its "naturalness" was a function of the denial and concealment of that labour (Evans and Thornton, 1989: 13).

The fact that Stone has her hair dyed and cut so as to detract from her glamorous star image simply reminds the viewer that although aspiring to a career as a legitimate actress, Stone remains a beautiful yet artificial and hence corrupt film star. Therefore, even when Sharon Stone makes a conscious effort to transcend her sex-symbol past by performing in serious and asexual roles, the process through which the actress is made to look serious and asexual merely reveals the artificiality of Stone's performance.

Review media often makes reference to other (more credible) actors in order to draw attention to the superficiality of Sharon Stone's performances on screen. With this in mind, *Time* magazine informs us that Sharon Stone is not the first Hollywood star to make a bid for acting legitimacy and artistic credibility:

Falling prey to the lure of the Oscars, normally glammed-up female stars don drab frocks, sport the no-makeup makeup look, play a character who opts for the spiritual over the sexual and, if possible, speak in an accent. Hey, if it worked for Meryl Streep. Sharon Stone is the latest entrant in the Streepstakes; she plays a death-row inmate in Bruce Beresford's *Last Dance*. (Corliss, 1996)

Like *The New York Times* and *Premiere* before it, *Time* magazine can be seen to comment upon the surface appearance of the actress in the death-row drama. Once again we are informed that the normally glamorous Hollywood star performs without makeup or feminine adornments. The review publication presents Sharon Stone's performance in the film in contrast to her earlier performances in *Basic Instinct* and *Casino* as we are asked to think about the ways in which Stone's earlier incarnations of fashionable femininity can be derided as an artificial construction of feminine identity. The review exploits Sharon Stone's investment in what has been seen as the shallow, trivial and irrational world of fashion in order to demote the actress to the status of the Hollywood star performer devoid of acting talent or credibility. The review makes a value distinction between the serious actress and the star performer through references to fashion apparel and beauty practices. While the prestigious actress is understood as a natural image of female identity, the Hollywood star is understood as an artificial and painful construction who must employ image, rather than talent as capital.

Stone has regularly commented on the fact that what she really aspires to is a serious acting career like Meryl Streep in which the performer is accepted for the integrity of her work, rather than for the circulation of glamorous images and personal information, and *Last Dance* could have been understood as Stone's opportunity to be accepted in this way. *Time* presents *Last Dance* as Sharon Stone's opportunity to legitimise her career, and as such, one might suggest that the review presents Stone as an actress in the Meryl Streep tradition as she forgoes feminine glamour and surface appeal in order to evoke inner emotions and the essence of the death-row convict. The publication presents Meryl Streep as a glamorous performer who made a successful bid to transcend her sex-symbol past, and as such, it is interesting to look at the ways in which the weekly news magazine uses what it terms the "Streepstakes" as a crucial intertext for its commentary on Sharon Stone. The feature positions Stone in relation to Streep in order to denigrate the former as an ephemeral star player and the latter as a legitimate model of feminine identity and acting credibility.

Meryl Streep is considered by both popular and critical publications alike to be one of today's most talented character actresses. From *The Deer Hunter* (1978) to *Out of Africa* (1985) and from *Ironweed* (1987) to *The Hours* (2002), Streep has had both a critically and commercially successful acting career. Throughout her time working in Hollywood, the actress has been nominated for and been the recipient of numerous prestigious awards from The Oscar and the Golden Globe to the Screen Actors Guild Award. Streep studied theatre arts at Vassar, Dartmouth and Yale before being nominated for the Oscar for her role as the girlfriend of a man who serves in the Vietnam War in *The Deer Hunter*. She has been nominated for the Academy Award twelve times, and has won it twice for her roles in *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) and *Sophie's Choice* (1982). In the former film Streep played a

troubled spouse and in the latter she played a Polish woman who survives Nazi persecution during World War Two. One could argue that the critical success of Streep's career is based on Bourdieu's notion of commanding capital due to the fact that the actress has previously studied film and theatre at prestigious institutions. From this perspective, Streep has not only the necessary training to play such serious and challenging roles as the inmate mother in a Nazi death camp, but the professional associations to consolidate a credible performance.

Meryl Streep is positioned as an outstanding performer who has "mastered to an almost uncanny degree the skill of transforming herself into whatever character she portrays." (Internet Movie Database, 2002) More importantly here however, is the fact that she "has accomplished this at the expense of establishing a clearly defined star persona." (Internet Movie Database, 2002) Streep is seen as a unique Hollywood chameleon whose strength of performance is seen to outweigh the actress' off-screen personality. It is clear from this brief but significant feature that Streep's acting ability is mutually exclusive to the notion of Hollywood stardom and star personification. Perhaps more importantly, the feature makes it clear that acting ability is an acquired skill that needs to be mastered while achieving fame and fortune in Hollywood is merely a matter of what has been termed sheer luck and public fancy. Whereas Streep is trained to disappear into the roles that she plays, Sharon Stone is indeed a very different performer; while Meryl Streep can absorb the identity of the film character that she is playing, Sharon Stone remains the memorable identity in any of the characters that she plays.

Review media exploits Sharon Stone's inability to get beyond "doing Sharon Stone" in order to position the actress as a poor performer. Stone's identification as a beautiful and sexual film star is opposed to the figure of the serious actress who comes to figure as an emblem of art, performative depth and authenticity. Rather than consider the ways in which the look of the character creates ideological significance and meaning for the role that she is playing, those institutions associated with Hollywood often deride Sharon Stone's performances based on her physical appearance and surface attractiveness. Therefore, at a time when contemporary feminist thinkers have been exploring the possibilities of a cultural politics that transcends the structuring male gaze, much review media continues to draw on women's visibility through fashion and beauty practices in order to associate the female performer with triviality and bodily display.

I have already suggested that the popular reception of *Last Dance* compares Sharon Stone to Meryl Streep in order to critique Stone for her poor performance and inauthentic portrayal of the death row convict. I shall now demonstrate the ways in which such review publications made reference to Susan Sarandon in their commentary on Sharon Stone. Review media was seen to re-title *Last Dance* as "Dumb Blonde Walking" with Sharon Stone in the eponymous "dumb" role (Howe, 1996). Therefore, it is interesting to look at the ways in which such film sources employed Susan Sarandon's role in *Dead Man Walking* (1995) as a crucial intertext for Sharon Stone's performance in *Last Dance*. Susan Sarandon is considered to be, like Meryl Streep, one of today's most talented character actresses who has had both a critically and commercially successful acting career from the 1970s to the present day. Throughout her time working in Hollywood, the actress has been named for and been the recipient of numerous prestigious awards, with four Academy Award nominations in the 1990s alone in films such as *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992), *The Client* (1994) and *Dead Man Walking* (1995).

In the year that Sharon Stone was nominated for the Oscar for the role of Ginger McKenna in *Casino*, Sarandon won the award for her performance in *Dead Man Walking*. In that film the actress plays Sister Helen Prejean, the real-life Roman Catholic nun who served as a spiritual adviser to a death row killer at Louisiana's Angola State Prison. The film was presented as both "enobling" (Ebert, 1996) and "extraordinary," (Maslin, 1995) with Sarandon's performance being singled out for attention. The *San Francisco Examiner* informs us that her performance in the film is beyond comparison due to the fact that, "Sarandon is a wonderful actress, so confident in her abilities that she is willing to give just the kind of quiet and unflashy performance warranted here." (Shulgasser, 1996)

Sarandon is often presented as a legitimate performer who only looks at scripts for characters that really challenge her as an actress, with *Dead Man Walking* as a case in point. The review makes it clear that Sarandon is a talented character actress who can create a role out of a deep understanding of the person that she is playing, with each small gesture and mannerism making meaning for the character in question. In contrast however, review media critiques Sharon Stone as a performer who can only appear as a beautiful film star without the inner depth and emotional attachment necessary for a credible performance. Sarandon is elevated for the effectiveness of her minimalist, stripped down mode of impersonation whereas Sharon Stone is routinely derided for her mode of personification that draws attention to the actress rather than to the craft of her work.

My point here is that irrespective of the part that she is playing, Sharon Stone is unable to direct media attention away from her body as a site of spectacle to her body as a site of performance. Sharon Stone's performance in *Last Dance* was not received favourably, and was not the making of the star as a legitimate artist. Rather than champion her authentic feminine display or elevate her acting performance beyond the superficial mode of personification, much review media was seen to draw on the negative association between visibility and bodily display in order to highlight the triviality and artificiality of her portrayal. The fact that the reviewer cannot get beyond seeing the beautiful actress means that in the eyes of Hollywood and its surrounding media discourses, Sharon Stone remains a glamorous star presence who is expected to don high heels, eye-liner and a come-hither look respectively. In this way, review media seems to suggest that Sharon Stone's star image is founded on a culturally produced idea of femininity, a femininity that is seen to stand for self-indulgence, extravagance and erotic display for the male gaze.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to consider the ways in which a wide range of review publications that span media forms of quality and distinction presented Sharon Stone as an erotic object put on display for the structuring male gaze. After all, publications routinely portray the actress through discourses of feminine beauty, surface appearance and sexual attractiveness for that gaze. In this way, I hope to have illustrated the ways in which debates over this star image can be understood as a social struggle over formations of taste, sexuality, respectability and feminine identity in popular culture. Review media has an investment in Sharon Stone as a sexual and superficial star image, and as such, review publications fail to elevate Sharon Stone as a legitimate actress or a credible film artist. Rather, review literature merely rates Stone's mode of personification in *Casino* as a highly fitting performance, whilst deriding her role in *Last Dance* as an inauthentic portrayal. When review media cannot shoehorn Sharon Stone into the narratives of the superficial performer or the mainstream sex star, those

institutions associated with Hollywood are all too ready to punish the actress for being too self-aware, manipulative or simply lacking in talent.

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