

Walking the Line: Negotiating Celebrity in the Country Music Biopic

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In the foundational celebrity studies text *Stars*, scholar Richard Dyer suggests that any given performance might explain only part of an actor's success in a given role. As he notes, "a star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as *promotion, publicity, films, and criticism and commentaries*" (Dyer, 1998: 60). Defining promotion as "texts which were produced as part of the deliberate creation/manufacture of a particular image or image-context for a particular star" and publicity as star-related information that "does not appear to be *deliberate* image-making" (i.e. information that might appear in gossip columns or tabloids), his separation of the elements of the star image suggests that no one thing can account for an actor's success or failure in a given role (Dyer, 1998: 60, 61). Rather, what Dyer defines as "audience foreknowledge" (which includes familiarity with the story of a film, familiarity with characters, promotion, star/genre expectations, and criticism) affects viewers' expectations—and perceptions—of a film, and the performances contained therein (Dyer, 1998: 107-109).

This is particularly complicated when one views a biographical film, in which the viewer is likely familiar not only with the life of the actor in the lead role, but with the "real" life of the character being portrayed. Further, the audience is likely to evaluate both the film as a whole and the actors' performances on how well the film and performances conform to their knowledge of the film's subject. Robert Niemi speaks to this in *History in the Media: Film and Television*. As he states,

when members of a viewing audience see the familiar phrase, 'based on a true story,' flash on the screen during the opening credit sequence, they tend to assume, rightly or wrongly, that the movie they are about to watch will deliver more significance than a pure fiction and will therefore require a heightened level of attentive engagement and respect. (Niemi, 2006: xxi)

George Custen, author of *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, agrees with this, though he finds this phenomenon problematic. As he states, "Hollywood biography is to history what Caesar's Palace is to architectural history: an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity" (Custen, 1992: 7). Regardless of a given biographical film's actual authenticity, however, audiences are likely to take it seriously—and

to find it extremely problematic if it does not live up to their preconceived standards.

This is complicated further still when the subject of a biographical film is a country musician, as country musicians are evaluated according to standards of authenticity that are not identical to the standards applied to the biographical film. When country music scholars talk about "authentic" country, they typically mean things like respect for tradition, the notion that the singers, in the words of Hank Williams, Jr., "live out the songs that [they] wrote" (1979), and the conformity of the performers of such music to preconceived standards of stereotyped rural identity. In contrast, when biographical film scholars talk about authenticity, they are more likely to mean how well the film and its performers captured the life of the person depicted.

Critical reception of *Walk the Line*, the 2005 film chronicling the ten-year courtship of Johnny Cash and June Carter, illustrates this concern with the authentic. Although both Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon received very good reviews for their respective portrayals of Cash and Carter, Witherspoon was repeatedly cited as giving the stronger performance. In many cases she was perceived as more "authentic" in the role, and even though, as online critic Devin Faraci noted, "June could have been just a supporting female character," she walked home with a Best Actress Oscar for the film (Faraci, 2005). In this essay I argue that, as Dyer's scholarship would suggest, the acclaim she received for the role cannot be attributed to merely one factor; rather, she was lauded in the role because of the complex interplay between actor, role, and persona. This analysis provides a unique opportunity to examine the intersection of two decidedly different types of celebrity: the country star and the film star.

Before analyzing either Witherspoon's performance or the publicity surrounding the film, it is necessary to explain the differing (though sometimes overlapping) ways that authenticity is defined in regards to country music and the film star. Scholars David Sanjek and P. David Marshall both suggest that the concept of authenticity is central to popular music as a whole; as Sanjek notes in the foreword to *A Boy Named Sue: Gender in Country Music*, "in the context of American popular music, one of the most traveled paths leads to the satisfaction of an insatiable appetite for authenticity" (qtd. in McCusker and Pecknold, 2004: vii). Marshall further clarifies what, specifically, is meant by authenticity as he states, "how he or she expresses the emotionality of the music and his or her own inner emotions, feelings, and personality and how faithful the performer is to the intentions of the musical score are all part of how the individual performer is determined to be authentic" (Marshall, 1997: 150). Thus, authenticity is not only something that audiences seek out, but that, much like an actor's success in a given role, is also not dependent on any one thing.

Marshall further explains that a pop performer's authenticity is also often dependent on how much the audience perceives a performer to be *like them*. He states:

[T]he star's cultural power depended on a very close affinity with a specific and loyal audience. The star, then, was actively engaged in the construction and differentiation of audience groups, in terms of style and taste, and in authenticating their elevated position. The popular music star, more than other forms of celebrity, had to be a virtual member of his or her own audience in order to sustain his or her influence and authenticity, and the commitment of the fan. (Marshall, 1997: 161)

Jocelyn Neal, author of "The Voice Behind the Song: Faith Hill, Country Music, and Reflexive Identity" notes that this is particularly important for the country singer. She asserts:

Within the tradition of country music, artists are expected to connect with their fans through shared biographical experiences and the relevance of their personal backgrounds to a stereotyped country identity. These tokens of authenticity amplify the genre-identity of an artist's output—Loretta Lynn's coal mining roots, Merle Haggard's time on the wrong side of the law, or Dolly Parton's Smoky Mountain upbringing are all frequently invoked as synonymous with the content, meaning, and impact of their music. (Neal, 2003: 111)

Thus, a pop musician's authenticity is typically amplified by the degree to which they are able to demonstrate what they have in common with their audience; for the country singer, this typically means stressing elements of a rural identity.

Although a film star must also demonstrate authenticity, they do so in a different way than a country musician might. This is partly because there is some debate as to how much film stars are supposed to—and, in fact, can—appear to be *just like* their fans. As Dyer puts it,

[O]ne of the problems in coming to grips with the phenomenon of stardom is the extreme ambiguity/contradiction...concerning the stars-as-ordinary and the stars-as-special. Are they just like you or me, or do consumption and success transform them into (or reflect) something different? (Dyer, 1998: 43)

Marshall suggests that it is the nature of the film apparatus itself that creates this ambiguity. He also notes that, as with the pop star, this perception of authenticity is largely dependent on the audience:

The character in the film may set the heroic type that the star embodies, but the relationship to the real person behind the image completes the construction of the celebrity: the audience wants to know the authentic

nature of the star beyond the screen. Through reading the extratextual reports about a particular film celebrity, the audience knits together a coherent though always incomplete celebrity of identity. (Marshall, 1997: 85)

Thus, the fact that an actor is playing a character onscreen creates distance between them and their audience; however, it is because of this distance that the audience seeks out additional information about the star to find the "authentic" person behind the image.

It is with this in mind—as well as Dyer's observation that a performer's success in a given film is never attributable to only one thing—that it is necessary to give an overview of Witherspoon's professional history before providing a close examination of her performance in *Walk the Line*. A native of Nashville, Tennessee, Witherspoon booked her first commercial (for a local flower shop) when she was seven years old (Brown, 2007: 7). After winning parts in other local commercials and taking local modeling jobs as a child, she had her big break at age fourteen, when she won a role in *The Man in the Moon*, which was filming in Nashville (Brown, 2007: 7-9). She appeared in more than twenty films between 1991, when *The Man in the Moon* was released, and 2005, when *Walk the Line* premiered. Although the range of roles that she played during that time was actually quite vast (from semi-illiterate Vanessa Lutz in the 1997 film *Freeway* to overachiever Tracey Flick in 1999's *Election*), her biggest hits came from romantic comedies *Legally Blonde* in 2001 and *Sweet Home Alabama* in 2002, which grossed \$95,001,351 and \$127,214,072, respectively ("Box Office/Business for *Legally Blonde*," "Box Office/Business for *Sweet Home Alabama*"). Although she received many positive reviews from critics, in roles in films such as *Sweet Home Alabama*, she was often cited as "rising above" less-than-challenging material. For example, *Entertainment Weekly*'s Lisa Schwarzbaum contended that *Sweet Home Alabama* would have been "unbearable were Witherspoon not such a genuinely attractive performer. Pinning her easy, roll-with-the punches performance between gestures of city elegance and those of country spunk, the Nashville-born actress manages, from time to time, to give [her character]...a dignity and autonomy the script itself doesn't know what to do with" (Schwarzbaum, 2002).

Critics did not forget such roles when they reviewed *Walk the Line*, though in most cases this had a primarily positive effect. The *Las Vegas Weekly*'s Jeffrey M. Anderson noted that Witherspoon, "after five years of wasting time in stupid romantic comedies[,] has delivered a performance of passion and precision worthy of the promise she showed in *Election*" (Anderson, 2005). Similarly, *Film Journal International*'s Daniel Eagan wrote that "Witherspoon is a revelation, showing a balance and maturity that's been missing from much of her previous work" (Eagan, 2005). Thus, Witherspoon was partially considered successful in *Walk the Line* because she was seen as good in comparison to her previous

roles. This begs the question: was there something specific about the June Carter role that allowed Witherspoon to showcase skills unseen in previous films?

Online film critic Alan Dale points to this in his review of *Walk the Line*. As he states,

The one thing *Walk the Line* does absolutely right is to show how different June's approach to performing is from Johnny's—she thinks of herself as a purveyor of conventional entertainment and no more. She's not *reaching* for anything onstage because she knows real life is lived before and after the show. This is great for Reese Witherspoon as June because it calls for some authoritatively fast, comic shifts at the margin between backstage and onstage. The complementary excitement in Witherspoon's performance comes from seeing June's professional manner flicker on and off; the more genuine emotion she feels, the *less* expressive she becomes in public. (Dale, 2005)

This can first be seen in a scene in which Witherspoon-as-Carter has an encounter with a fan in a Wheeling, West Virginia store. She is approached by a store employee, who, after asking Carter if she needs help finding anything, adds, "You know, your ma and pa are good Christians in a world gone to pot." Carter's face lights up in a smile, and she warmly tells the woman that she'll pass along the compliment. Quite abruptly, the woman shifts gears, telling her, "I'm surprised they still speak to you, after that stunt with Carl Smith. Divorce is an abomination. Marriage is for life." As the woman speaks the camera stays on June's face and we see a range of emotions quickly play out; in the space of only a few seconds her expression changes from confusion to shock to what appears to be genuine hurt. By the time the woman has finished speaking, however, June's expression has shifted to neutral passivity, and she responds with a calm, "I'm sorry I let you down, ma'am." When she approaches Johnny Cash in an aisle of the same store only a few moments later, there is no sign that the encounter has even bothered her. We see, then, that even offstage, Carter has her "game face" on at all times; it would obviously be unthinkable for her to break down crying in front of a fan, or to yell at a fan. Rather, she keeps her emotions to herself, playing the part of the performer any time she is in public. Witherspoon, in turn, must be aware of this, and be able to negotiate this shift.

The second example of this comes very quickly in the narrative, occurring on the same night of June's encounter with the woman in the store. That night, she stands backstage drinking a soda and watching Johnny Cash play his set; she is shocked when Johnny suggests to the crowd that she join him onstage and emphatically shakes her head no. At this point in the film she and John have connected on a couple of occasions as friends, with him confiding in her about his brother's death and her comforting him about life on the road, which she has lived since she was a child and he has just started. He has also expressed

romantic interest in her, which she rebuffed, citing the fact that she has a "world of judgment" on her following her divorce and that he seems to have a nice family. Never have they appeared onstage together; however, this will quickly change as he gets the crowd to join him in chanting her name and it becomes clear that she won't be able to refuse without making a scene. Although from backstage she shoots him a look that indicates that she would like to kill him, the minute she steps onstage she is all smiles and cheerfully greets the crowd. He suggests that they sing "Time's A-Wastin,'" a duet she recorded with her ex-husband Carl Smith, which she quickly deflects, suggesting that they sing his song "Big River" instead. When he insists on "Time's A-Wastin'" she covers the microphone with her hand and hisses that it would be inappropriate for her to sing a song that she recorded with her ex-husband. When the music starts, however, she begins singing, and even seems to be enjoying herself—that is, until she catches sight of the woman who had earlier reproached her for her divorce sitting in the crowd, looking on judgmentally, and until Johnny kisses her on the cheek. With an angry, "Don't do that," she runs offstage and locks herself in her dressing room, tearfully yelling at Johnny to leave her be when he chases after her. Clearly, both the intrusion of her offstage life—the reminder of her divorce, and the fact that some are judging her quite harshly for it—and Johnny's attempt to turn an onstage performance into an opportunity to get closer to her personally, are too much for her, and she leaves the stage before her public and private lives can become any more intertwined. Here, Witherspoon has been given another opportunity to shift between June's "onstage" and "backstage" personae.

James Naremore, author of *Acting in the Cinema*, would define such moments as "metaperformance":

Most film actors are acutely sensitive to the purely rhetorical need to make their 'thought' visible to the camera. Moreover, they must sometimes signal that they *act persons who are acting*. In these moments when deception or repression are indicated, the drama becomes a metaperformance, imposing contrary demands on the players: the need to maintain a unified narrative image, a coherent persona, is matched by an equally strong need to exhibit dissonance or expressive incoherence within the characterization. Thus, we could say that realist acting amounts to an effort at sustaining opposing attitudes toward the self, on the one hand trying to create the illusion of unified, individualized personality, but on the other suggesting that character is subject to division or dissolution into a variety of social roles. (Naremore, 1988: 72)

Thus, Naremore might suggest that Witherspoon was successful in the role because she was able to successfully perform these moments of "metaperformance", when Carter herself was "acting."

In *Interview* magazine Witherspoon indicated that the actor understood why Carter may have felt it necessary to "act":

She was living in a world where it was completely unacceptable for her to be doing what she was doing. She lived in the shadow of everyone's judgment...I try to think what it was like for a woman to tour around with a bunch of men back then and to have people look at you, like, "I'm a good Christian, who the hell are you?" (qtd. in Brown, 2007: 129)

Thus, Witherspoon believed that social pressures may have caused Carter to feel guilty about her lifestyle.

Country music scholarship indicates that Witherspoon was likely correct. As Pamela Fox notes in "Recycled 'Trash': Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography" women in country music "embody 'home'. From its inception in the late 1920s, traditional country mythology has made the family its centerpiece, envisioning distinctly gendered roles for that institution's maintenance and protection" (Fox, 1998: 244). However, because the demands of touring often keep the country musician out on the road, away from that home, success automatically renders female country musicians "distinctly gendered 'failures' of country authenticity: as working female celebrities, they forfeit not only their traditional pasts, but also their present maternal identities. By 'choosing' the tour bus...they lose their claim to 'home' altogether" (Fox, 1998: 244). Thus, a female country musician—particularly one living during the 1950s and 1960s, when the majority of *Walk the Line*'s narrative takes place—might reasonably have felt a sense of failure for spending a great deal of time away from home.

This perceived sense of failure provides additional opportunities for Witherspoon to perform the moments of "metaperformance" that Naremore describes—though it is important to note that because *Walk the Line* is a male-centered country biopic, the home represents a somewhat ambiguous space. For Johnny Cash, the home is a site of sadness and oppression; during his childhood, after his brother dies, there is no happiness for Johnny at home apart from listening to the radio and dreaming that he may someday leave. This theme continues throughout his life (as depicted in *Walk the Line*); home is where his wife, Vivian (Ginnifer Goodwin), discourages him from pursuing a career in music and forbids him from talking about life on the road. If Vivian is the embodiment of that oppressive life at home, then, for Cash, June is the embodiment of all of the possibility that lies out on the road. In fact, his first meeting with June takes place on his very first performance on his very first tour—her appearance in the film *literally* signals the shift in the narrative's focus from Cash's life at home to life on the road. In this narrative, then, the woman at home is vilified, while the woman out on the road holds the promise of "real" love and a relationship in which the man is allowed to be himself. It is important to note, however, that while neither Cash nor the narrative of *Walk the Line* expect or want June Carter

to live up to the traditional country ideal of "home," June herself (as portrayed by Witherspoon) does not feel free from these pressures; it is clear that she herself feels guilty about her two failed marriages and about leaving her children at home, and that, unlike Cash, she wishes to draw a clear line between her home life and her life on the road.

We see these lives begin to collide, however, the second time that Johnny and June are onstage together. At this point in the film, Cash and Carter have spent a considerable amount of time apart; she has re-married (stock car driver Ralph Nix) and he has become dependent on drugs and alcohol. The two run into each other at a country music awards ceremony and he asks her to come back on tour with him. Though it is obvious from the intimate way that he leans toward her as he convinces her to join him that he is really asking her something else, one can imagine that she is able to justify accepting his offer because of her ability to separate stage life from offstage life—going on tour together, after all, doesn't necessarily have to mean anything more than just that. When we see them onstage together, however, it is obvious that something else is going on; anyone watching the two of them can easily see the chemistry between them. Indeed, when Johnny makes eye contact with his wife Vivian, who is sitting in the front row watching the performance, the expression on his face mirrors that of someone that has been "caught in the act"; the intimacy between John and June is so palpable that Vivian might as well have caught them in bed together. After the show she reacts almost as if she has. When John introduces June to his parents and young daughters and June greets the girls warmly, Vivian firmly and clearly tells her to "stay clear of [her] children." June tries to protest that she was just saying hello; Vivian simply responds, "You heard me." On the surface, the reaction seems somewhat harsh; however, in that moment Vivian is the only one openly acknowledging that onstage and offstage life are one and the same, and she refuses to let anyone pretend differently.

As it is later revealed, Vivian is correct. On the night of a concert in Las Vegas, June finally allows the line between home and the road, between onstage and offstage, to be crossed when she and John make love for the first time. The morning after, the two lie in bed together, flirting, kissing, and having fun until the phone rings; it is June's daughter, crying over a fight she has had with her younger sister. As June sits comforting her, her eyes drift over to John who is popping pills. Almost immediately it is obvious that she is redrawing the line in her head. John whispers to her that he is going to leave her alone and she nods distractedly. Later, when he calls her and tries to come back to her room, she refuses to talk to him or see him. Once again, Witherspoon is given the opportunity to perform a "shift" in Carter's demeanor and persona; the intrusion of the "home" into Carter's life on "the road" once again causes Carter to shut down.

That June would feel so conflicted about life on the road is unsurprising when one looks at the options available to female country singers at the time. In *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music*, Joli Jensen notes that in country music, "home is always portrayed as rural—green, welcoming, often with mother or girlfriend waiting" (Jensen, 1998: 29). In this construction, she explains, women play one of two roles: "they are either angels (waiting at home, patient and loving) or fallen angels (sitting in honky-tonks with tinted hair and painted lips). They succumb to the glamour of city night life even though their men beg them to stay home" (Jensen, 1998: 30). Although I have established that neither the filmmakers of *Walk the Line* nor Johnny Cash share this perspective—in the world of *Walk the Line*, home is oppressive, while the road is where the hero can actually be himself—this, once again, does not mean that June Carter was unaware of or unaffected by this perceived dichotomy (or, perhaps more importantly, that Witherspoon would not have chosen to play her as affected by this dichotomy). It is clear throughout the narrative of the film that Carter views her two failed marriages—and, by extension, her attraction to Johnny Cash—as failures. She does not want to be one of the "fallen angels sitting in honky-tonks with tinted hair and painted lips," and from her perspective, that is the only alternative to being the patient, loving wife at home. The family she was born into determined that the road would be her home; however, it is unsurprising that she would long for a more traditional home and that she would regard the fact that she has not established and maintained a traditional home as a great failure. With this in mind, it is also unsurprising that she would repeatedly draw a line between home and the road, between onstage and offstage, between the life she actually has (which involves being in love with a married man with a drug problem) and the life she thinks she is supposed to have.

Despite her repeated drawing and redrawing of these lines, however, the road and the stage are quickly becoming the only places where June can be truly honest about what she really wants and what she really feels, which becomes more obvious in her next scenes in the film. After John collapses onstage due to his escalating drug addiction, June checks on him in his room; he demands, "Tell me you don't love me." Almost without skipping a beat, she responds, "I don't love you." He tells her that she's a liar, to which she responds with a flip, "Well, then I guess you ain't got no problems, do you?" When she goes home, however, she sits down at the kitchen table and begins writing the song "Ring of Fire," which includes the lines "love is a burnin' thing" and "I fell for you like a child." One suspects that this is the safest way for her to express her feelings—if she writes them in a song, she can always say that it is, in fact, just a song, and that it has no bearing on how she really feels. For June, then, performance and song are places where she can hide, places that she can pretend are separate from her real life. This is in direct conflict with the idea that the country singer's onstage persona closely mirrors their offstage life, although it is unsurprising for

June given the limited options she felt she had available to her in her offstage life.

With this in mind, it is also perhaps unsurprising that the film's climax occurs during the scene in which June finally accepts that her onstage and offstage lives have become intertwined, that the road, so to speak, will be her home and that the distinction between onstage and offstage will disappear. She helps John recover from drug addiction and once again accompanies him on tour; although to some extent, she seems to have acknowledged that the two of them are more than singing partners, she refuses marriage proposals from him on more than one occasion. The most serious of these marriage proposals happens, perhaps fittingly, on a tour bus; he wakes her in the middle of the night and informs her that he has decided that it is time for them to get married. She, in no uncertain terms, tells him that it is *not* the right time, citing several concerns that the two of them face in their offstage lives: "Where are we gonna live? What about my girls? What about your girls? What about your parents, John? Your daddy won't even look at me." He dismissively says that "that stuff'll just work itself out," to which she responds that it does not simply work itself out; people work it out for him, and he thinks it works itself out. He accuses her of being scared: of being in love, of losing control, and of living in his "big fat shadow." This makes her furious, and the next night she tells him that he is not allowed to speak to her: "The only place you're allowed to speak to me is onstage, do you understand?" This keeps in line with what we know about her; she is not one who would ever refuse to go onstage just because she is angry with him, and she is capable of acting one way onstage and another way off.

We see this when the two take the stage together; after introducing her as the writer of "Ring of Fire," he asks her if she will come sing a song with him. Playfully, she responds, "I'll sing with you, Mr. Cash, are you sure that's what you want?" They begin singing "Jackson"; however, early in the song he stops singing and announces to the audience that he has to ask June a question before they finish singing the song. It is here that we witness June's final negotiation between onstage and offstage, home and the road. "What's that, John?" she asks. Her smile is forced and she speaks in a tone that is meant to convey to the audience that this is all part of the show. When he asks if she will marry him she gives him a look of warning: "Why don't we just sing the song, John?" He responds, "No, darlin'," with a tone of finality in his voice. Her smile becomes almost comically large and her tone even more forced, even perkier: "Come on, finish the song. People want to hear us sing." Since she is playing to the audience, he also turns his attention to the audience, saying that he is sorry but he "just can't do this song anymore unless she's gonna marry me. It'd just be like we're lyin'." June begins to look and sound panicked at this point: "You got these people all revved up now, John, let's sing 'Jackson' for 'em." Once again, the huge smile comes out and she tries, one final time, to relegate this to the realm of performance. He won't allow that to happen; he responds firmly,

"You've got me all revved up. Now I've asked you forty different ways, and it's time you come up with a fresh answer." She is speechless; finally, quietly, she pleads, "Please sing." He responds, "I'm asking you. To marry me." She looks away and makes eye contact with a band member who looks at her almost sympathetically. As John continues talking, a range of emotions play across her face, comparable to the range that played across it when the woman in the Wheeling store chastised her; the camera, once again, stays almost completely on her as she responds to his declarations of love, his promises that he will never hurt her again and that he "will NOT leave you like that little Dutch boy with your finger in the dam." She looks down, crying, and shakes her head. When he asks her again to marry him, she looks at him with an unreadable expression. Finally, with a hint of a smile and in a barely audible voice, she replies "Okay." He asks, "Yeah?" and she nods. They kiss and the audience cheers; flashbulbs go off, making it clear that the audience is recording this incredibly intimate moment as it unfolds in public and onstage. In that moment, June is forced to acknowledge that her onstage and offstage life *are* the same thing and that what happens onstage *is* what is real.

Witherspoon's perceived success in her role as June Carter can be partially attributed to her ability to portray what she perceived as Carter's internal conflict between "home" and "the road," between her "backstage" and "onstage" personae, as well as the fact that the role was considered a departure from other roles the actress had played. However, it is important to note that criticism and film are only two of the elements Dyer identified as important to a star's perceived success in a given role; also important are promotion and publicity. Marshall further speaks to this by noting that "the extratextual domains of magazine interviews...television appearances, and so on are attempts at discerning the authentic nature of the film celebrity by offering the audience/public avenues for seeing the individual in a less constructed way" (Marshall, 1997: 117). With this in mind, it is important to acknowledge that extratextual elements surrounding *Walk the Line* may have affected Witherspoon's perceived success in her June Carter role.

The attempts of *Walk the Line* director James Mangold and Witherspoon herself to create connections between the real-life Carter and Witherspoon may have been particularly effective. Specifically, Witherspoon's Nashville upbringing and her real life role as wife to actor Ryan Philippe (whom she later divorced in 2006) and mother to children Ava and Deacon was repeatedly emphasized. Mangold, for example, told *The Washington Post* that Witherspoon shares "more than you know with June. There's another side to Reese. She's incredibly sharp, incredibly well-read. She's a mother of two, a wife, so many things that an actress in her twenties in L.A. is rarely," (Booth, 2005: N01). Similarly, Witherspoon emphasized her Southern roots in an interview with *The New York Times*, stating,

I understand June Carter and her family...the South is a spiritual place, a place where God is very important in people's lives. It's about the ritual of family and togetherness and singing and storytelling. It's about giving back to the community, investing in other people's lives, caring about people (qtd. in Brown, 2007: 88).

She further told *Australian Magazine*:

I think I understand the history of country music because I grew up in Nashville. I related to June because she was a southerner like me, you know; we're nice people...I think there are similarities between us. June was a woman trying to have a career and children, like me. (Lipworth, 2006: 18)

Thus, both Mangold and Witherspoon can be seen as trying to establish Witherspoon's authenticity in the role by emphasizing that she relates to Carter, that she has things in common with Carter, and that her heritage and life experiences make her particularly capable of understanding Carter.

It might initially seem curious that Witherspoon would take such pains to cast herself as similar to Carter considering, as Marshall notes,

[T]he screen star invokes a number of codes to indicate his or her ultimate independence [from the roles they play]. This code of acting, the active reworking and then publicly performing his or her private life for public consumption, and the playing of 'serious' or against-type roles all work to concretize the star as a more permanent sign of the public sphere. (Marshall, 1997: 187)

In other words, the actor typically performs one "personal" image and then deliberately plays against that image in films in order to make it clear that they are actually acting, as opposed to playing themselves. In *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*, Geoff King further explains this, drawing on Barry King's definitions of "impersonation" and "personification." Impersonation, he explains, "involves the disappearance of the 'real' personality of the performer into the part," while in personification, "distinct individual traits are not masked but subordinated to the requirements of a particular part but played up, recognizably, from one performance to another" (King, 2002: 150). Generally, he notes, "personification tends to be looked down upon, or seen simply as 'poor acting.' Oscars for best performances usually go to those deemed capable of impersonation" (King, 2002: 150-151). With that in mind, wouldn't one expect Witherspoon to play up the aspects of her life that are *different* from Carter's in order to display her acting talent? Not necessarily—particularly when one considers that critics *already* viewed the Carter role as a departure for Witherspoon. As King further observes, when a recognizable star figure appears in a film, "various possibilities are created for the filmmaker. Expectations can

be met or frustrated, depending on the effect desired. Hollywood movies generally tend to meet more expectations than they frustrate, for commercial reasons" (King, 2002: 149). Thus, when one considers that Witherspoon was *already*, to some extent, "frustrating expectations" by departing from the romantic comedies with which she had had such previous success, it makes sense that she would emphasize the similarities between herself and Carter, rather than the differences. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to expect that some critics and fans might have doubted her ability to play more serious roles due to her appearance in such films. Therefore, such interviews can be seen as a means of establishing herself as *qualified* to play June Carter.

Witherspoon's attempts to establish common ground with Carter make even more sense when one considers Dyer's notion of "perfect fit" between actor and star. As he states, "in certain cases, all the aspects of a star's image fit with all the traits of a character" (Dyer, 1998: 129). Thus, in the case of *Walk the Line*, various aspects of Witherspoon's persona—her performance, critical response to previous films, and publicity surrounding *Walk the Line*—can be seen as working together to establish her success in the performance.

In conclusion, multiple factors work together to establish an actor's perceived success in a given role. This can become particularly complicated when an actor is playing a real person and even more complicated when an actor is playing a country star that is held to particular standards of authenticity. However, when the varying aspects of an actor's star persona work together, a "perfect fit" can occur between actor and role, making it likely that the actor will be perceived as successful.

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