

# Mature Meryl and Hot Helen: Hollywood, Gossip and The 'Appropriately' Ageing Actress.

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## Introduction

In a 2009 article from the UK *Guardian*, Vanessa Thorpe writes,

When a film star seduces someone 20 or 30 years their junior on screen, the audience doesn't bat an eyelid. In fact, it is an established cinema convention. If the older star is a woman, however, public reaction is harder to predict. But now Hollywood, so long accused of sexism because of the way it treats female talent, finally seems prepared to tackle a subject once regarded as beyond the pale: sex and the sixty-something woman.<sup>1</sup>

Somewhat surprisingly, Thorpe implies that one of Hollywood's enduring battles has been won. What prompted this article was the success of Meryl Streep in *It's Complicated* (2009), the romantic comedy written and directed by Nancy Meyers and starring Streep as Jane Adler, a woman well into middle age who finds herself romantically pursued by her ex-husband who is finding life with his much younger 'trophy wife' stressful and unfulfilling. Whilst Streep's enduring star power and performance in this film is noteworthy, it is quite a leap to suggest that Hollywood has cast off its long-standing regressive attitude towards its older female stars and is now squarely addressing the issue of middle-aged female sexuality.

However, in recent years, there has been an increased number of films starring and aimed at older women in major, often romantic roles in Hollywood. The benchmark of the trend was arguably set in 2006 with *The Devil Wears Prada* (David Frankel 2006). This continued with *Sex and The City* and *Sex and The City 2* (2008, 2010 Michael Patrick King), *Mamma Mia!* (Phyllida Lloyd 2008), *Julie and Julia* (Nora Ephron 2008), *It's Complicated* (Nancy Meyers 2009), *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (John Madden 2011) *A Song for Marion* (Paul Andrew Williams 2012) and *Hope Springs* (David Frankel 2012) which all not only alerted Hollywood to the financial benefits of aiming films at a lucrative older demographic, but also portrayed older women on screen in major roles where the narrative is actually centred around them.

Streep is not the only older actress that that is an exception to the rule of Hollywood's ageism. Helen Mirren and Judi Dench have both enjoyed high profile careers in Hollywood in recent years. Dench's relative youthful 'plainness' has worked in her favour as she has aged with recent roles in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and *Skyfall* (Sam Mendes 2012). Dench's look and classical theatre training has proved an alluring combination for Hollywood which

along with Mirren, who will be discussed in detail in this chapter, has managed to secure major film roles well into her sixth decade, a feat almost unheard of in Hollywood.

These actresses are clearly exceptions. Older female stars in Hollywood remain consistently linked with ageing narratives, in part due to the rapid acceleration of discourses of celebrity gossip, largely circulating online. The age narrative is *the* central trope in celebrity gossip discourses where the perpetual discussion of the age of female stars and whether their behaviour, lifestyle and look is 'age appropriate' feeds an increasingly dichotomised account of ageing femininity. Discourses in popular culture surrounding the majority of older female Hollywood stars are first and foremost framed in terms of narratives of ageing, which are always structured in terms of how well the actress is 'managing' her ageing process. It would appear that discourse surrounding the female star's face and body are the principal ways in which they are now both represented and consumed in the media. It is discourse about a star's ageing face and body that becomes the locus for discussion in the media. These women are still revered at one level, but they are also exposed, examined and scrutinised in order to reveal their corporeal construction and to somehow make visible the artificial nature of their identities.

In the context of a mass media that scrutinises every aspect of the ageing star, this chapter will consider the star images of Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren, two of the most successful older female actresses in Hollywood. Streep and Mirren are interesting examples as they are often perceived as examples of 'growing old gracefully'. Both have been central to the perceived recent recognition of older women on screen in Hollywood and how it may appear that through their success, the maturing female star is now beginning to be revered rather than rejected in popular culture. It will examine how despite the perceived positive nature of these shifts, this acceptance appears only possible when it is also linked to the legitimacy of the 'craft' of acting, where certain actresses are spared unremitting scrutiny of their ageing process and are allowed to mature on screen because they are considered 'authentic' talents and therefore more 'acceptable' as ageing women. Both Mirren and Streep are considered substantial talents therefore their appearances seem less important to their star image and indeed their ageing, yet they both actually conform to a rather narrow standard of beauty that Hollywood espouses. This chapter will also address the construction of the ageing female celebrity and the state of endless transformation, which appears to be so revered in postfeminist culture and will explore how these actresses are 'allowed' to age. Evidently others have a much more problematic relationship with Hollywood, celebrity and indeed their own ageing narratives such as Kelly Le Brock, Cher,

Melanie Griffith and Kathleen Turner. To conclude, the chapter asks what might these contradictory themes tell us about ageing and Hollywood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that might be different from previous eras?

### **Ageing in the spotlight.**

In an article from *The Hollywood Reporter* in 2013, Tatiana Siegel suggests,

Planned obsolescence used to be the norm, where fresh young faces eventually obliterate the existing reigning class. But the new premium on concept over casting has upended a nearly 100-year-old star system. The March 2013 *Performer Q Study*, which measures both how well-known and how well-liked a celebrity is, found Sandra Bullock statistically tied with Tom Hanks, 56, for the film star top spot among U.S. survey respondents over 18. "Her movie roles have been so diverse, from comedies to serious, that she's tracking younger and older, male and female. She cuts across the spectrum."<sup>2</sup>

Siegel suggests that a previous industry norm where older actresses, typically over 40, would be replaced by younger stars, seems to have undergone a shift. According to Siegel, those stars that were at the top of their industry a decade ago such as Sandra Bullock, Nicole Kidman and Cameron Diaz, are still there. Siegel argues that they are just as able to attract audiences as they once were. If this is the case, it is a seismic shift in thinking from an industry that has long mistreated its older female stars. In fact, there remains an endemic attitude to older female stars that they may appear on screen, but they should never look their age, unless it is a key element of the narrative of the film.

Rosalind Gill suggested that postfeminism privileges 'Femininity as a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the popular media embodies postfeminism in such a way that suggests women must always look younger than their years. They are routinely instructed to maintain a slender body, engage in exercise and diet regimes and participate in carefully chosen 'appropriate' surgical and non-surgical interventions to extend middle age for as long as possible. Those that are perceived to 'fail' the navigation of these boundaries are widely denigrated in the popular press and online gossip discourse. At this juncture, it is important to examine some of these issues and address why some older female actresses in Hollywood appear to escape the unremitting scrutiny of their faces and bodies and are revered as quintessential examples of how to grow old 'gracefully'. These stars are often deemed acceptable due to their moderate use of cosmetic surgery. A precarious balance exists in

that stars such as Mirren and Streep are celebrated because they appear to eschew cosmetic surgery, whilst others are scrutinised for either a lack of attention to their ageing faces in the cases of Kathleen Turner and Bridget Bardot or the overuse of cosmetic surgery such as Meg Ryan and Melanie Griffith.

Indeed, in the popular media, the older female face and body is regularly deemed ugly unless it has been modified 'correctly' by cosmetic surgery or is considered hyper-feminine and associated with glamour narratives from the bygone Studio System era. Ageing in the spotlight has long been couched in these terms, where the fact of ageing is considered something that must be fought rather than accepted or embraced. There are now huge contradictions in evidence in celebrity culture when discussing the representations of cosmetic surgery. Blum argues that there is a strong connection between celebrity culture and cosmetic surgery, and that the star system has actually worked to create a beauty norm that has led to the widespread adoption of cosmetic surgery. She states,

Of course, stardom can happen only in the context of a large audience that converges in the celebration of the iconic actor. Consider how necessary this institutionalisation of star culture has been to the creation of a culture of cosmetic surgery. In order for cosmetic surgery to be appealing, not to mention a viable professional solution, enough of us have to agree on standards of beauty... the star is both the standard and an instrument of standardization.<sup>4</sup>

These repeated narratives and images have now led to a culture where cosmetic surgery is not just accepted, but embraced as an essential part of the fight against ageing, and not simply in the entertainment industry.

In gossip discourses, ageing stars are often configured in terms of disintegration and invisibility. Ageing is rarely represented in the media in terms of a woman's growth and development of knowledge. Ways to maintain youthful beauty are espoused continually, often in the careful use of cosmetic surgery. Representations of cosmetic surgery when linked to stars and ageing are steeped in contradictions. Female stars are both vilified as extreme versions of abject plasticity and routinely praised for 'fighting the battle' with age through embracing the surgical technologies available to them and conversely revered for growing old naturally. Hollywood actress Melanie Griffith provides an interesting example. Griffith is a product of Hollywood. She is the daughter of actress Tippi Hedren, has been working since she was 9 months old, has had a career of highs and lows, and was most notable for her widely lauded performance in Mike Nichol's *Working Girl* (1988), which gained her an Academy Award nomination. She has fought widely publicised battles with alcohol and painkillers and has been tabloid fodder for many years, particularly since her

marriage to actor Antonio Banderas in 1996.

Much of the discourse surrounding Griffith is now focused on her inability to age well. There is very little positive coverage of her, she is perceived as a woman whose failure to use cosmetic surgery 'correctly' has resulted in her limiting her ability to gain work. In 2007, *The Daily Mail* showbiz section reporter Kristina Perdersen wrote,

When Melanie Griffith arrived at a film premiere last weekend, it was her plump lips and line-free forehead which drew all the attention. But a few days later on a shopping trip, the focus moved down a few feet - to her wrinkly knees. Although the actress does not turn 50 until August, the area exposed by her white cut-off jeans could have belonged to a woman of far more advanced years. <sup>5</sup>

Indeed, this and similarly negative coverage on a plethora of gossip sites surrounding Griffith is linked to her supposed failure to understand that the processes of age management must be barely visible for a woman. Her infamous 'trout pout' lip filler in the 1990s still remains the most talked about aspect of her star image. The *Celebrity Cosmetic Surgery* website stated in 2013:

If you speak to her current husband, Antonio Banderas, the answer may be clear. When asked about his wife having plastic surgery, he said, "*This lust for beauty is a terrible thing. I've forbidden her from ever going to a cosmetic surgeon again. It is something we have agreed to for the sake of our marriage.*" Perhaps Banderas is afraid his wife will eventually go down the path of awful celebrity plastic surgery with the likes of former Playmate Shannon Tweed, Mickey Rourke, or "The Cat Lady" Jocelyn Wildenstein. <sup>6</sup>

It would appear that according to the popular media ageing women who do not manage the ageing process correctly in effect deserve the negative coverage and subsequently, gain little work in the latter stages of their careers.

Despite this widespread negativity, there appear to be some Hollywood stars who have managed to circumvent these discourses and have become synonymous with the recent shift in the acceptability of visible aging in Hollywood. Those stars who are characterised as not engaging in cosmetic surgery are represented as 'brave' as they choose to 'grow old gracefully'. There are also those such as Mirren and Streep who are considered so talented that their looks are not the main focus of their star image. Such women are singled out as bringing something unique to their craft. This appears to be linked to their

backgrounds as classically trained actors and the idea that they bring a sense of gravitas to projects that they appear in.

### **Helen Mirren- ageing and the 'hot' body**

As Imelda Whelehan suggests in her analysis of postfeminist discourses of ageing in Hollywood cinema, 'Producers and consumers of popular culture have reached a bizarrely schizophrenic impasse in which older women rarely pass scrutiny because there are no positive meanings that reconcile post-menopausal women to the body; the numerical fact of their age generally renders them not fit to be seen.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Whelehan is correct to suggest that older women who discuss or display their bodies or their sexuality are most often treated with disdain. Indeed, the older woman's body is never seen in Hollywood cinema, it is never discussed except within a framework of decay. Post-menopausal women are mostly invisible in Hollywood. This is why some journalists were heralding a sea-change in Hollywood based on the success of *It's Complicated* because it was simply so unusual for Hollywood to address female mid-life sexuality in this way. Indeed if this film had starred another older Hollywood actress, it may not have gained such widespread attention. Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren are two of the few examples of a new kind of acceptability, they have managed to age in front of the camera as well as being highly visible in celebrity culture without facing the vitriol and lack of roles that many other actresses are confronted with as they age. This highlights the deeply schizophrenic discourse of ageing where some women are 'allowed' to age and others are continually disparaged for their supposed inability to manage their ageing.

Helen Mirren is often considered one of Britain's finest actresses. Mirren has had a long and varied career on stage, television and film. She has been the recipient of numerous awards from the major industry awarding bodies and organisations including an Academy Award, four BAFTAS, three Golden Globes and four Emmy's to date. As a classically trained actress who worked extensively with The Royal Shakespeare Company early in her career, Mirren's willingness to perform semi-nude and nude scenes in a variety of her film and stage roles developed a persona associated with sex and sensuality that has become her trademark. In an industry that is notoriously insecure in terms of employment, Mirren has worked consistently. Her reputation as a 'serious' actress was secured early in stage roles such as Cleopatra (1965) and further cemented in popular culture with her roles in classic television dramas such as *Prime Suspect* (1991-2006). She has also embraced more experimental work in Peter Greenaway's, *The Cook, The Thief, his Wife and Her Lover* (1989).

Mirren's persona was established alongside the relaxation of stage censorship in the 1960s and broader sexual liberalisation in society more widely. As she has aged, Mirren's star persona has continued to be shaped by associations with sex and sensuality. Yet due to the cultural value that is associated with serious theatre, Mirren has been virtually exempt from negative criticism in the media regarding her looks because she conforms to a version of tasteful ageing that is celebrated in the mass media.

When Mirren was photographed by the paparazzi in a bikini at aged 62 on holiday in 2008, the image went viral. This image was discussed, debated and dissected across the world, largely praised as an example of sexy, yet tasteful ageing. Mirren has subsequently been associated with sexual allure, confidence and beauty. What is interesting is that she is seen as a figure of transgression, in that she speaks to a narrative of rebellion. Older women are not supposed to wear bikinis and flaunt their ageing bodies, they are not supposed to dye their hair pink and appear at film premieres flirting with younger actors as Mirren has. Indeed, she is able to circumvent the discourses of disdain that are normally associated with ageing women. However, it seems that the image went viral because Mirren conforms to traditional notions of body image and youthful physical standards. It would seem that because of this image, Mirren is now held up as the role model for feminine ageing. Indeed as Sadie Wearing suggests 'Ageing in post-feminist culture seems marked by both a gesturing toward utopian desires to transcend time and chronology evident in makeover paradigms and a concurrent tendency to emphasise time, chronology and generational (and sexual) difference.'<sup>8</sup> Wearing locates the nexus of postfeminist approaches to ageing. In this context, it is the uncovering of an essentialist version of femininity that lies at the heart of celebrity culture and that Mirren represents. In her article on performing age and gender, Kathleen Woodward points to this overriding negative association with ageing in western culture. Woodward explores what she terms 'the youthful structure of the look' which exhorts us to pass for younger once we reach a certain age. She explains,

In our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the older female body paradoxically both hyper-visible and invisible. It would seem that the wish of our visual culture is to erase the older female body from view. The logic of the disappearing female body would seem to be this: first we see it, and then we don't.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Mirren is one of the few exceptions in an industry that is youth-obsessed and she is singled out as bringing something unique to her craft. She is perceived as a slightly eccentric, yet authentic, glamorous example of how to not go under the knife and still 'age well'. What is interesting about Mirren is that she performs youthfulness very successfully and attempts to galvanise positive media debates about the older female body and face. From her red carpet appearances to interviews, there is a sense that she is keenly aware that she is being judged as an older woman and appears to play around with this idea in the way that she dresses and carries herself. Sarina Lewis from Australia's *Sunday Morning Herald* suggests, 'At 65, Dame Helen Mirren is more sexually charged goddess than cardigan-clad nanna, and she's at the vanguard of a new breed of 60-somethings for whom age is little more than a number. This group of women, previously consigned to the garbage bin of cultural irrelevance, are redefining long-held stereotypes and successfully battling society's youth focus to become a powerful new authority.'<sup>10</sup>

Lewis clearly suggests that there is a binary opposition at work in both the cultural stereotype of the older women as a 'cardigan-clad 'nanna' and the idea of a female Hollywood film star as a 'sexually charged goddess'. It would appear that according to Lewis, there is little in between, but that this is being challenged by stars such as Mirren. Lewis argues that there has been a shift in the way that older women are perceived and are indeed perceiving themselves through the women that are currently representing their demographic in the popular media. However, the dichotomy remains that women such as Streep and Mirren are deemed acceptable, even attractive, because they do not display 'normal' signs of ageing. They are couched in a rhetoric of femininity, whereby because they look younger and very feminine, therefore they are still worthy of positive media attention. If Mirren would have displayed an ageing body that is closer to the majority of 'normal' women's bodies with the usual signs of ageing- wrinkles, weight gain, varicose veins, sagging breasts and cellulite, it is unlikely she would be considered a 'sexually charged goddess'.

### **Meryl Streep: Re-defining ageing in the spotlight ?**

For nearly forty years Meryl Streep has been considered one of the greatest actors of her generation. Streep studied at Yale Drama School, and then worked in New York on Shakespeare Festival productions and on Broadway. Like Mirren, this 'classical' theatre training affords Streep an identity linked to authenticity, true talent and legitimacy. This operates through an ability to immerse themselves within a role. This is an important part of Streep's persona and reputation and the meticulous method that is often associated with



her. Streep's 'method' is constructed similarly to some male contemporaries yet Streep's performances are often considered as more measured and careful without the extremes associated with other method actors in the industry such as Robert De Niro, Christian Bale and Daniel Day-Lewis.

Since the release of *Mamma Mia!* in 2008, her most commercially successful film to date, Streep has become synonymous with the perceived new visibility of the mature woman in Hollywood and has also been a vocal critic against ageism in the film industry. In a 2012 interview in *Vogue* magazine Streep stated, 'Once women passed childbearing age they could only be seen as grotesque on some level'.<sup>11</sup> At the 2009 premiere of *Doubt* (John Patrick Shanley) when asked whether she had come up against discrimination in her career, she said: 'Yes, of course there is ageism in the film industry. There's discrimination in every profession. Look around the room. There are a lot of young women here who are journalists, but do you see any women my age? No. And if you look into the corporate corners of your company, there aren't a lot of women there either. But we're fighting that, and we're making inroads against discrimination.'<sup>12</sup> Streep is able to voice this viewpoint with little criticism because she is perceived as Hollywood royalty, having earned the right to express her opinions. More recently, Streep gained huge mainstream commercial success with *The Devil Wears Prada* and *It's Complicated* and has since become synonymous with a version of ageing that has been configured as acceptable, relatable and sexy, far from the usual malicious discourse reserved for the majority of ageing women in Hollywood.

Theories about Streep's durability in a harsh industry tend to run along two related lines: her talent and her choice of roles. Critics and scholars alike cite Streep's acting reputation as the main reason for her longevity, such as Karen Hollinger's idea 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'.<sup>13</sup> In gossip discourses, both in the popular press and online, it is interesting to note that Streep barely appears in any gossip blogs or magazines in anything but a positive light. Streep's case may be a tentative sign that there has been a minor shift in terms of positive attitudes towards ageing in the spotlight, but she is a rare example in the midst of a maelstrom of negative coverage of ageing women. Typical discourse in the gossip industry and blogs in particular, generally place female stars into ageing categories, most often linked to their use, or not of cosmetic surgery and which are generally couched in terminology that is based around being 'gruesome' or 'desperate'. These terms tend to outline the flow of discourse that pervades gossip in relation to female celebrities, which is

then often integrated into their star images and become part of the circulation of discourse in relation to their star status. The culture of hyper-scrutiny that exists within the gossip industry is explicit and contradictory. There are websites such as *awfulplasticsurgery.com* and *famousplastic.com* that track celebrities' surgery in minute detail and allow readers to view detailed images of celebrity surgery. Such sites present categories such as *Bad Brow Lift*, *Bad Cheekbone Implants* and *Awful Plastic Surgery Victims*, and simultaneously deride and revere the processes of surgical transformation, both mocking the celebrity but offering the reader advice and guidance on how to undergo surgical procedures correctly and where to gain sound advice. Sites such as these present their versions of appropriate and inappropriate age-maintenance with sections that feature examples of 'bad' surgery and those that congratulate celebrities for getting their surgery right. These sites tend to define these good examples as 'invisible' and those that 'enhance' rather than change the celebrities face. Websites such as these also punish the celebrity for attempting to transcend time or more pertinently, making visible the signs of labour involved in maintaining a youthful look. Many of these sites present a difficult and aggressive negotiation about what is and what is not acceptable in terms of cosmetic surgery. The gossip industry thrives on waiting for, and sometimes provoking the female celebrity to 'fall from grace', as if it was always only a matter of time before age will catch up with them.

Molly Haskell suggests, '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.'<sup>14</sup> It is this anti-stardom that allows her to be accepted as she ages. Publicly disdaining celebrity culture, but presenting a star image that is based on openness and honesty, Streep appears to avoid such scrutiny. Instead she is widely revered for what is usually described as her 'grace, warmth, wit and talent', rather than her physical appearance, undoubtedly an unusual treatment of an older female star in popular culture. Indeed Hollywood is beginning to recognise women's acting talent and that this may well supersede physical attractiveness. Early in her career, Streep was often associated with a sense of over-calculation and a lack of sex appeal, both of which seem to be currently working in her favour. Whereas Mirren's success was linked directly to her sexuality, Streep's inhibitions led her to be represented as cold and serious. Indeed, 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 facets of Streep's star image as both career woman and family woman have allowed her to circumvent the typical negative treatment of an ageing Hollywood star. It is this notion of the presentation of a

sense of authenticity in both career and image that have allowed her to maneuver around the discourses of disdain.

Streep's star identity is a complex mixture of everywoman, star, feminist and traditional family woman. She has openly discussed her allegiance to feminism throughout her career, taking on roles that often represent figures of female authority, but none that pose any kind of significant threat to other women, at least not up to this point. Streep's reputation, which has always been based on her talent and not her looks, may in fact position her as a progressive figure in female stardom in Hollywood, 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.

Yet the majority of her films have been squarely mainstream and their narratives have essentially reinforced hegemonic ideas about femininity, family and career choices. Many of her films, such as *The Bridges of Madison County* (Clint Eastwood 1995), *Marvin's Room* (Jerry Zaks 1996), *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Pat O'Connor 1998) and *One True Thing* (Carl Franklin 1998), are unabashedly female-focussed tearjerkers that associate femininity stereotypically with uncontrolled emotional expression and often maudlin sentimentality. Hollinger suggests, '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' (95). Indeed her middle class, educated background further render her particular brand of ageing Hollywood stardom a veritably safe one. Streep represents a version of ageing sexuality that is deemed appropriate and acceptable. Her image is one of the 'everywoman'. It is traditional, safe, not completely unattainable and embodies version of middle-aged motherhood that is still 'sexy' and yet mature enough not to be deemed controversial. Hence her mass-appeal to both men and women. It would appear that traditional values; marriage, motherhood and conforming to a largely traditional beauty ideal have been reconfigured in the star image of Streep as something fresh, inspiring and inspirational.

Yet many of Streep's contemporaries have disappeared into the abyss of few and limited roles for women beyond their mid-40s. Stars such as Susan Sarandon, Diane Keaton and Sissy Spacek have as film critic Jonathon Romney suggests, 'fallen by the wayside, suffered patchy careers, or bowed out, weary of sub-par roles'.<sup>15</sup> Keaton, for instance, has been unable to capitalize on the success of 2003's *Something's Gotta Give* (Nancy Meyers 2003) and of the few projects she has appeared in since, many were flops, such as *Mama's Boy* (Tim Hamilton 2007) and *Mad Money* (Callie Khouri 2008). However, Streep has

managed to navigate these trends that normally disadvantage ageing actresses. Indeed, discourses about her physical appearance have taken an interesting turn, with media commentary tending to bolster her 'desirability' as an attractive older woman. 'There's a glow, a sensuality and a radiance about Streep these days. Put simply, she's looking great' Also, she possesses a relatable kind of beauty that makes her seem more like one of 'us,'<sup>16</sup>

The overriding meta-textual theme circulating around Streep is her refusal to undergo cosmetic surgery. Streep has openly stated she is anti-cosmetic surgery, whether this is actually the case is up for debate, but it remains an important aspect of her relatable star image. This is another facet of Streep's stardom that has worked in her favour, as despite the cultural pressures on famous women to remain 'youthful'—the use and overuse of cosmetic surgery has harmed the careers of a number of high profile actresses and who have become labeled as gruesome or grotesque such as Meg Ryan, Cher and Melanie Griffith. Streep has successfully avoided these discourses and her acting ability has become the primary marker of her star image rather than her looks. Her ageing is accepted because she is somehow considered 'authentically attractive' and possesses a relatability that renders the malicious discourses redundant.

This may well be in part due to her versatility and her ability to disappear into a character so that the audience is unable to associate her with a particular look or sense of 'Streepness' as is possible with other stars of her generation such as Goldie Hawn. Hawn's star persona as the, blonde, ditzy, cute all American is present within all of Hawn's roles. Whereas Streep's more obvious acting talent means that the audience is able to forget that they are watching Meryl Streep and her star persona becomes largely subsumed by the character she is playing. Indeed, Streep's ability to play such a range of characters never allows the audience to form a firm relationship with her image. Of Streep's contemporaries, many have core traits around which particular themes gather; for example, Diane Keaton and Sally Field seem girlish, engaging and all-American and Jessica Lange is often characterised as having a fragile sex appeal. Yet in Streep's case, there is no set of predictable characteristics. The irony is that all of those characteristics once considered limitations in her star image, appear now to be her strengths. As Streep has never worked within the confines of her image being based on sex appeal, she therefore has no need to live up to an image that can be dismantled as she ages. Her decision to talk openly about nudity in her films has categorized her as a rebellious, sexy, older woman who has both talent and looks. Indeed, Streep's star image has certainly been 're-booted' in recent years, the commercial strategy term that reframes a franchise, comic book, character etc in order

to revive it and profit from it. This is a useful way to situate the recent resurgence of Meryl Streep's career. By moving away from her characteristic intensity and dramatic works into lighter, more comedic roles, Streep has shifted her star image in recent years. While it is not completely uncommon for long career trajectories to function cyclically, which emulates the way that genre often functions in Hollywood, her ability to consistently work and still find success should not merely be understood in terms of the projects she is offered or the commercial success that may or may not follow. Indeed, Streep provides a complex and contradictory example of the newly acceptable ageing woman on screen, only acceptable because she ticks many of Hollywood's normative boxes in terms of her physicality in that she is slim, toned and conforms to Western standards of female attractiveness. Thus this acceptability is always within narrowly defined boundaries and those that do not conform to these very limited ideals will often find themselves unable to secure major roles in mainstream cinema.

#### **The axis of talent and beauty.**

In conclusion, both Mirren Streep represent unusual examples of ageing in Hollywood, whereas many of their peers have been unable to keep working continually in film and/or moved to television to find more complex roles or indeed roles at all. From this analysis, it is clear that Streep is revered for her talent and her refusal to display her body, whereas Mirren is revered for her talent and for displaying her body. Whether or not their success is truly indicative of a new acceptability of a woman ageing 'naturally' in Hollywood remains to be seen, but both Streep's and Mirren's acceptability presents a more positive representation of the ageing female Hollywood star on screen. Indeed, there appears to be a link between the ways in which talent is configured in relation to beauty in Hollywood and in the media in general. Those actresses whose ageing is not received in a positive way are also not critically acclaimed for their work or are considered 'past their prime'. For some, the success of their performances in their youth can never be recaptured as they are unable to retain the essence of their looks that went with that performance. There are notable exceptions such as Judi Dench whose career in film has been enhanced as she has aged. Indeed, representations of ageing women in post-feminist celebrity culture and the gossip industry reinforce the need for reinvention to avoid the pressure of the ageing process. Celebrity culture and postfeminism offers ways to transcend time. Postfeminism suggests that meticulous management of the ageing process will somehow provide the means to rescue the self. Women, both famous and non-famous are taught to internalise temporal

constraints and only through a variety of given techniques will they be able to defy time. Cosmetic surgery provides the means to achieve these temporal problems. Ageing in celebrity culture and in Hollywood in particular emphasises continual engagement with corporeal intervention. Only by fighting age correctly, being subject to hyper-scrutiny and passing internalised tests will the celebrity or star become accepted as an ideal model of selfhood and achieve that transient state of perfection that Streep and Mirren appear to have achieved.

## Notes

1. Thorpe, V (2009) <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/dec/20/hollywood-sex-older-woman-weaver>
2. Siegel, T (2013) *Revenge of the Over-40 Actress* 6/5/2013 by <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/sandra-bullock-melissa-mccarthy-beyond-562530>
3. Gill, R (2007) Post feminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. May 2007. 10: 147-166.
4. Blum, V (2003) *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery*, University of California Press
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