

Julianne Moore Subversive Star As Performer

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Julianne Moore is a performer who approaches her work with versatility. She is active in film and TV; commercial and independent sectors; diverse genres; and plays supporting and lead roles despite her stardom, which was solidified in 2015 with her Academy Award for *Still Alice* (Westmoreland/Glatzer, 2014), a triumph after four previous nominations. This makes her a particularly interesting subject for star image study. Christine Geraghty draws attention to the importance of studying female stars as operating differently than male stars both in the industry and in discourse (Geraghty). She argues that women have historically been denied recognition for their acting and have found an alternative way to stardom through celebrity, which places its focus not on skill and talent, but on the investigation of the star's private life (Geraghty 196-197). This is enforced due to "the common association in popular culture between women and the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity" (Geraghty 196). Following another association with femininity, Karen Hollinger notes that female stars tend to be approached in relation to their beauty and image rather than their craft (4). Although Julianne Moore does not escape these trends entirely, I argue that the construction of her star image both on and off-screen has allowed her to inhabit them in a subversive rather than affirmative manner. This essay explores how Moore opposes Geraghty's

argument through her status as an actress as well as the meanings of her star image, proving to be a role model that women can safely look up to.

Moore has reiterated many times that her family is her priority above all else and that she considers being a mother and wife her most enriching role (Cochrane). Yet, she has insisted on keeping her private life private (Mackenzie). She rejects the concept of celebrity and has attracted little tabloid attention, inciting Suzie Mackenzie to ask "Who is Julianne Moore?" in response to her proportionally little known public profile despite a career spanning over 25 years. I argue that what allowed her to do so is that her image has from the start of her career been built upon her work, making her a star-as-performer in Geraghty's classification, a category historically reserved for male actors. Geraghty

writes, "The claim to stardom as performer depends on the work of acting being put on display and contrasts to stars-as-celebrities who can become famous for 'being themselves' and stars-as-professionals who act as themselves" (93). Mackenzie has likened her to great male actors such as Marlon Brando, Al Pacino and Jack Nicholson, arguing that they all master the craft of identifying their roles with inner elements of themselves while making themselves disappear behind their characters. What this recalls is the Method, according to Geraghty a characteristic of the star-as-performer and defined by Colin Counsell as a respected acting technique favouring "an increased emphasis on the significance of a character's inner life and the signs by which it could be deduced" and "a height-



ened 'emotionalism'" (Counsell, 56). The applicability of this style to Moore's performances seems fitting considering that she has been called the "queen of the big-screen breakdown" by Oliver Burkeman for her portrayals of troubled women who remain composed until a breaking point. She is further known for a strength to find the human within every character, likeable or unlikable, which has gained her a reputation for being risky and fearless (Waterman). Moore herself has described her technique as far from the Method on the basis that she believes in being present in the moment of performance, but does not stay in character off the set or even in-between takes (Wareman). On *Inside The Actors Studio*, she further reiterated that her secret for portraying strong emotion is being relaxed rather than tensing up and putting herself into that heightened emotional state through memory recall or similar techniques common for the Method. Nonetheless, her acting has come to be seen as an outstanding achievement on a par with male Method actors, positioning her counter to the perception of this technique as predominantly male that has long denied women access to the category of star-as-performer (Geraghty 197-198). Her acclaimed roles in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Magnolia* (1999) further enforce her link to the Method as she acts as part of an ensemble alongside Mark Wahlberg, Burt Reynolds and Philip Seymour-Hoffman. Ensemble performances, as Geraghty notes, have come to be seen as another aspect particular to Method acting (194).

Moore further needs to be regarded as an impersonator, another characteristic of the star-as-performer according to Geraghty. Impersonation as opposed to personification – "the fusion of the role actors play with their personalities" so that the role is always seen to be a version of the

star him/herself (King, 46) – relies on "a distinction between star and role" (Geraghty 192) and does not necessitate audience knowledge of the stars' private self in order to understand the performance (195). Moore has stressed that she is always aware that she is playing a character and not herself and has stated that this allows her to take on challenging and disturbing, if rewarding, roles (*Inside the Actors Studio*). Savage Grace (Tom Kalin, 2007), in which she plays a mother murdered by her son after a long-term incestuous relationship, is only one example. Her clarity on the split between character and self is also

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the source of her adaptability to roles of different scale, diverse genres, time periods, modes of filmmaking and directors. She attributes this to her itinerant childhood that has made her mutable and quick to adapt and has taught her that "How you behave, how you act, is not necessarily who you are" (Galloway). Moore hence successfully escapes Hollinger's observation that female stars tend to be perceived as "being" rather than "acting" due to their acting abilities being "more naturalized than those of male stars, who are much more likely to be described as highly skilled and well-trained professionals whose success is the result of hard work and mastery of the craft of acting, rather than of their physical attractiveness and natural talent" (55). This ability coupled with her resistance to publicize her private life, which minimizes the chances of mediating the perception of her roles through personal detail, has allowed Moore to build an image as

a skilled professional and incited Mackenzie to call her "the most talented actress of her generation." Martin Shingler notes that the challenge facing actors is to develop a range of acting styles and genres while maintaining a distinctive idiolect from film to film and concludes that "this requirement suggests that while physical and vocal attractiveness might enable them to stand out from their fellow performers, ultimately their longevity as film stars demands much more" (90). Having established that Moore fulfills the criteria of versatility and craft, it becomes clear that this is crucial to the success of her career that started late for Hollywood standards when she was already twenty-nine and has peaked in 2015 at fifty-five with her Academy Award win.

Having discussed Moore's status as an actress that shifts the focus for meaning construction away from her personal life and onto her on-screen persona, an analysis of this meaning further enforces my claim of Moore as a subversive performer as she participates in the negotiation of identity markers including gender, sexuality, race, class and ability. Although Moore has incorporated several roles of strong, powerful and public women such as FBI agent Clarice Starling in *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001) or president Alma Coin in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay 1 & 2* (Francis Lawrence, 2014/2015) as well as explicitly countercultural roles such as feminist artist Maude Lebowski in *The Big Lebowski* (Coen Brothers, 1998), Moore's specialty are fundamentally sympathetic portrayals of troubled women, often mothers and housewives. While this implies a link to "the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity" (196) that Geraghty sees as intrinsically linked to female actresses, Moore refutes the conservative connotations of that link. Instead of simply portraying social stereotypes of women and

fetishized objects of the voyeuristic male gaze, which according to Hollinger have limited feminist approaches to the star-actress (54), Moore's portrayals expose the social institutions and rules that underpin her characters' plights. This is particularly applicable to her most iconic appearances as unhappy 1950s suburban housewives in *The End of the Affair* (Neil Jordan, 1999), *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002) and *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002), all of which brought her Oscar nominations. *Affair* features her as unhappily married Sarah Miles in 1946 who follows her true feelings and begins a troubled, but passionate affair with a reporter. In *Hours*, she plays Laura Brown, a depressed and pregnant mother of a young son who contemplates suicide before deciding to abandon her family. As Cathy Whitaker in *Heaven*, a beloved socialite, housewife and mother with a sense for justice unusual for the time, she discovers her husband's homosexuality and falls in love with African-American gardener Raymond. As she goes through a divorce and is shunned by her community for speaking to Raymond, Cathy is forced to abide by the unwavering conservatism of her time. While all three women suffer under societal constraints, Laura is the only one strong enough to break out of it while Sarah's plight is ended by death and Cathy remains a slave to her situation. Geraghty, quoting Counsell, suggests that Method acting has been destructive to female actresses because of its emphasis on the divided self that in relation to women has been associated with neurosis, hence demonizing their characters as victim or villainess (198). However, even if many of Moore's characters including Sarah, Laura and Cathy appear as neurotic, she illuminates the reason thereof as an outcome of social hegemonic restraints linked to white, heterosexual patriarchy, and hence renders them deserving of understanding if not always compassion. As Moore

has stated, "I never care that [my characters] are 'strong'. I never care that they're even affirmative. I look for that thing that's human and recognizable and emotional; and then to render that truthfully" (*Inside the Actors Studio*).

What becomes unmistakable when examining Moore's filmography is that her approach to what is "human and recognizable and emotional" is guided by a strong anti-discriminatory attitude towards the human condition and human behaviour. Several of Moore's other films contain direct inversions of "the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity" (Geraghty 196) as they negotiate women's traditional roles within that sphere as mothers and housewives in relation to various identity mark-

She is a politically liberal atheist, a campaigner for gun control, a pro-choice activist for Planned Parenthood (Galloway), an ally to the LGBT community and an avid supporter of marriage equality (Cochrane).

ers. In *Still Alice*, a linguistics professor's decline of ability due to a diagnosis of early on-set Alzheimer's forces husband and children to reconsider their duties within the family. In *Boogie Nights*, her character negotiates class, status, the responsibility of being a good mother and the pain of failing as Amber Waves, a porn star unsuccessfully seeking custody of her son. Class further appears in *Magnolia* in which she plays morphine-addicted Linda Partridge who realizes too late that she loves the dying man she married for money and failed responsibility haunts her portrayal of psychologically abusive rockstar mother Susanna in *What Maisie Knew* (Siegel/ McGehee, 2013). Questions of sexuality are essential to the acclaimed comedy *The Kids Are Alright* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010) in which she

plays lesbian mother Jules in an alternative version of the nuclear family and in the recent *Freeheld* (Peter Sollett, 2015) in which she fights for her partner's right to receive her pension benefits as a lesbian police officer with terminal cancer. Lastly, her portrayal of aging, psychologically disturbed Hollywood actress Havana Segrand in *Maps to the Stars* (David Cronenberg, 2014) provides a clear idea of Moore's attitude towards public scrutiny and society's destructive treatment of women, and even more specifically women in Hollywood.

As I have previously mentioned, Moore herself certainly does not escape this scrutiny entirely. In 2009 she was included amongst *People Magazine's* "World's Most Beautiful People" and, an aging actress at fifty-five, has advertised for anti-aging products for L'Oréal and posed for Bulgari. In 2015, *Harper's Bazaar* featured her on its cover with the tagline "fabulous at every age." Despite adamantly opposing plastic surgery and embracing aging as a natural process (Lipworth), Moore partakes – willingly or not – in the celebration of "successful aging" that Josephine Dolan describes as the problematic process of drawing attention to the continued beauty of the aging body of female stars, hence rendering them the norm by hiding the labour that goes into them (342-351). Yet, Moore has over the years taken agency over these processes by consciously extending her sense for social justice and diversity beyond her screen-presence. She is a politically liberal atheist, a campaigner for gun control, a pro-choice activist for Planned Parenthood (Galloway), an ally to the LGBT community and an avid supporter of marriage equality (Cochrane). Moore does not dispute being a feminist and in relation to the relevance of the women's movements of the 60s/70s has said, "We can talk about glass ceilings, but we have

to remember there was a time when there wasn't even a door. I don't take any of it for granted for a minute" (Cochrane). At the 2015 SAG Awards she refused to walk her hand down the E! manicom that showcases actresses' fingernails, calling it "humiliating" and aligning herself with an increase in female actresses "taking a stand against red-carpet antics many find sexist" (O'Neil). Lastly, together with the women from *Still Alice*, she has started the My Brain Campaign that aims to support female Alzheimer's patients and she has spoken out for the Tuberous Sclerosis Alliance. Moore continues to publicly display her views and support on Twitter, trending hashtags such as #endalz, #IAMTSC and #WomenOfWorth, despite receiving angry responses (Galloway).

In conclusion, while her private life as a mother is rather conventional and "ordinary"—apart from the fact that her husband Bart Freundlich is 10 years younger than her and, of course, that both are professionals in the film industry—Moore has portrayed tortured, troubled, depressed, sick, alienated or otherwise disadvantaged women too numerous to list. The ability to do so, as I have shown, comes from her defiance of celebrity and inhabiting the status of star-as-performer. Hence her screen work is more important to the construction of her image than her private life and her acting has come to be recognized as a craft rather than personification that would attempt to create a link between her characters and personal self. Moore hence opposes the gender bias of the industry addressed by Geraghty that positions female actresses as inferior to male actors by shifting the focus onto their

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image, appearance and private life. Furthermore, even if she might not be unable to escape Hollywood ageism and sexism fully, she has made it clear that she does not embrace either through her refusal to partake in sexist red-carpet antics and through her status as an aging actress who has found more rather than less success following her 40th birthday, the critical age for women in Hollywood. When asked to speak on ageism, Moore simply said, "If you're 50 you're never going to be 50 ever again, so enjoy being 50" (Lipworth). In regards to her on-screen persona, Moore has proven that a female actress can carry

a film and that playing stereotypical female roles of mother and wife does not necessarily equal regression and passivity, but that it important to show these roles can be inhabited alternatively (i.e. by a lesbian couple) or to illuminate the struggles fought by women who have been forced into these roles unwillingly over decades. Lastly, her ability to portray even the most aberrant and misunderstood characters as either sympathetic or at least understandable, combined with her passionate and tireless off-screen activism for human rights and social justice, testifies to her status as a progressive woman of the 21st century who values diversity. As, in Tom Ford's words, "one of the greatest actresses working today, but [...] also a wonderful human being," Moore is a subversive star who continues to provide challenges to Hollywood and social hegemony both on- and off-screen.

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