Star Studies Today: From the Picture Personality to the Media Celebrity

Virginia Luzón-Aguado
Universidad de Zaragoza
vluzon@unizar.es

Although the study of film was already well established, Star Studies did not become the focus of serious, sustained academic research until the 1970s thanks to the seminal work of Richard Dyer, in which it was firmly established that film stars contribute fundamentally to the creation of meaning in a film text. It is for this reason that Star Studies has had a comparatively shorter, although not less productive, history than other areas of research within Film Studies. This paper will therefore be discussing the role, significance and value of Hollywood film stars within both our present society and the contemporary Hollywood film industry. However, in order to fully appreciate the current state of the institution of Hollywood stardom, it will also be necessary to briefly discuss its foundations and development, as well as the various ways in which stardom has routinely been analysed within the academic field of Film Studies. In order to illustrate my theoretical arguments, I will be focusing on the particular case of Harrison Ford, one of the most influential contemporary Hollywood icons.

Keywords: Film Studies; Star Studies; Hollywood Stars; Harrison Ford

A pesar de que los estudios sobre cine ya estaban bien asentados, el estudio de las estrellas no se convirtió en objeto de investigación académica seria y continuada hasta los 70, gracias a la publicación del trabajo pionero de Richard Dyer, que estableció que las estrellas de cine contribuyen de forma notable en la creación del significado de un texto fílmico. Precisamente por esta razón, el estudio de las estrellas ha tenido una historia comparativamente más breve, aunque no necesariamente menos productiva, que otras áreas de investigación dentro de los estudios de cine. El propósito de este artículo es por tanto analizar el papel, la importancia y el valor de las estrellas de Hollywood tanto en la sociedad actual como en la industria contemporánea del cine de Hollywood. En cualquier caso, para poder llevar a cabo un correcto análisis del estado actual de la institución, será también necesario prestar brevemente atención a sus orígenes y desarrollo, así como a las diferentes perspectivas desde las que las estrellas han sido analizadas dentro de la disciplina académica de los Estudios de Cine. A modo de ilustración de los argumentos teóricos expuestos, el caso particular de Harrison Ford, uno de los iconos más importantes del Hollywood de hoy en día, recibirá especial atención.

Palabras clave: estudio del cine; estudio de las estrellas; estrellas de Hollywood; Harrison Ford

1. Introduction

It may seem surprising to some, given the large amount of popularity that stars have traditionally enjoyed, that stardom did not become a serious area of academic film research until the late 1970s. There were several reasons for this. Early cinema was

essentially documentary, not narrative, in nature and it was in many senses what Tom Gunning has described as "a cinema of attractions" (in McDonald 2000: 21). That is to say, the magic of watching films did not emanate from the stories or the characters that actors played in a given narrative but from the spectacle of film technology itself as exemplified by illusionist-turned-filmmaker Georges Méliès's cinematic tricks, as in *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902), or by the extraordinary experience of seeing objects and people in motion, such as huge trains approaching mesmerised spectators, or, in the Spanish case, the seemingly banal experience of seeing people coming out of 12 o'clock mass at the Basilica of the Virgin of the Pillar in Zaragoza (*Salida de misa de doce del Pilar,* Eduardo Gimeno, 1896). During the early days of cinema, cameras were placed in fixed positions, long shots predominated and actors appeared on the screen in such a way that it was difficult to recognise their faces. In many ways, cinema resembled a theatrical performance. Hence, as McDonald has put it, "the first stars of cinema were the camera and the projector" (2000: 22). Increased demand led to various changes in film production, but it was the expansion of narrative cinema and the redefinition of performance space that gave rise to the emergence of the picture personality, i.e. a performer recognisable from film to film, during the second decade of the 20th century. With the later circulation of information about the private life of the picture personality, the film star—a performer recognisable both on and off the screen, or an actor with a biography—was eventually created (deCordova 1991; 2001).

Another early influencing factor that contributed to the neglect of Star Studies was the fact that in trying to elevate the recent discovery of cinema to the category of art, film critics of the early decades of the 20th century regarded technological aspects and the mastery of film language, i.e. the *craftsmanship* of cinema, to be of prominence over any others. As Butler has put it, "film could be justified as an art form … because the filmmaker did not just mechanically reproduce reality; he or she actually manipulated reality or even fabricated an entirely new reality" (1998: 342). The much-discussed 'Kuleshov effect' is a clear indication of this tendency. In this experiment from the 1920s, a shot with the expressionless face of an actor was combined with various other shots—the face of a child or a bowl of soup, among others. Even though the expression on the actor's face remained the same, it was reported that spectators interpreted it differently each time, thereby demonstrating that editing, one of the specialised crafts of the film artist, was capable of creating meaning. In other words, "meaning did not exist in the actor's performance, but rather in the manipulation of performance through editing" (Butler 1998: 342). The impact of the Kuleshov experiment devalued the work of the actor and neglected the importance of performance from the very beginnings of film theory, while montage or lighting, and later on *mise-en-scène* and the text, became the main focus of film theory. The situation remained very much the same until the 1940s.

As is often the case today, many film scholars during the 1940s to 1960s had been trained in literary criticism, where the text, or the author of the text, were taken to be the primary sources of meaning. The emphasis on the work of the director as *auteur* (or *metteur en scène* in French) became widespread due to the influence of certain French critics associated with the publication *Cahiers du Cinema*, one of whose many aims was to reconsider popular Hollywood cinema as a form of art, as the vision of a truly individual artist working under the conventional yoke of Hollywood cinema. This romanticised version of film art has remained strong up to the present day. The work of directors such as John Ford, Vincente Minnelli or Douglas Sirk was reassessed under this critical light but the performance of actors or the significance

of stars to film spectators were still little discussed other than as part of the overall artistic project of the *auteur*. All of this, coupled with the belief prevalent during the years of the studio system, but still existing today, that stars could not really act but played themselves or, as Dixon has beautifully put it, "behave[d] on cue" (2003: 83), led to the widespread neglect of the study of stars and the work they performed in front of the camera.[1] In addition, Marshall maintains that this was also a direct consequence of cinema's early documentary tradition, where actors were expected to perform (themselves) naturally, rather than act:

> the film actor ... was believed to be someone who did not use the craft and artifice of [theatre] acting: he or she performed naturally. ... Qualities of beauty, youth and stereotypical appearance became central to the profession of film acting to a degree they never achieved in stage acting. (2002: 232-33)

Finally, there had always been some reticence on the part of scholars to engage in serious research on stars because it was considered to be a frivolous activity, fit for star-struck fans and teenagers, not for level-headed academics. In connection with this, Branston has explained that

> [critics] were not used to appreciate, let alone celebrate or explore [sic] the fascinations of the play of performing bodies and faces, of both sexes, made-up, lit, framed, fragmented, sound designed and edited into the narrative motion which is a film. Indeed, for most of us, to express adequately what our favourite stars mean for us remains an intimate challenge. (2000: 107)

However, ever since the seminal work of Richard Dyer, whose influential volume *Stars* was first published in 1979, it has been firmly established that film stars contribute fundamentally to the creation of meaning in a film text, and their prominent role in the film industry, as well as in the process of cinematic creation, should not be underestimated. Moreover, Butler is probably right in pointing out that "the pleasures of the human body—speaking, moving, placed on display—are what consciously draw viewers to film … as much as genre does, and much more than editing, camera position and lighting might" (1990: 50). Therefore, it is essential to engage in this kind of study in order to build a more coherent and wider picture in our interpretive efforts. What is more, Star Studies provides a useful gateway into the study of film for it has the potential for analysing cinema from three different but equally significant stands: the semiotic and inter-textual perspective (i.e. star as sign and text), the audience perspective (i.e. star reception) and the industrial perspective (i.e. star production).

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[1] The famous final shot in *Queen Christina* (1933), for example, provides evidence that deliberate 'non-acting' by Greta Garbo, as instructed by the film *auteur* and enhanced by framing and *mise-en-scène*, can be considered to be great acting indeed. Dixon is here borrowing from King, who quotes Morin's opinion that acting in classical cinema involved a "deskilling process" which devalued the actors' work and elevated the director's mastery of film technique (1991: 170). In addition, King goes on to remind the reader that "in the studio system impersonatory skills were assigned a lower value compared to the cultivation of personae" (1991: 179). In other words, stars that appeared to 'perform themselves' represented more valuable assets to the studio, for they became trademarks at the studios' disposal. To a certain extent, this tendency remains in operation within contemporary Hollywood.

2. Three Approaches to Stardom

Richard Dyer's work (1986; 1999) firmly established that the star was not only a fascinating person that deserved admiration and celebration, but the icon of an era, a cultural sign that could be deciphered with regard to prevalent ideas regarding class, race, gender, sexuality or nationality. Such has been the influence of the semiotic-ideological perspective over the last few decades that Watson has concluded that "the critical vocabulary it proposes for discussing stars has provided the centre of critical gravity … to the extent that it is virtually impossible to discuss stardom without nodding in its direction" (2003: 170).

Indeed, before the Depression, stars in US cinema had a god-like, ethereal quality and their presence both on and off screen was equally magnificent. Yet, their representation changed significantly in the 1930s, during the years after the Depression, even though the stars' specialness and uniqueness still remained. According to Marshall,

> with the institutionalization of the Hollywood press corps and the related growth in the extratextual discourse circulated about film stars, film celebrities became a blend of the everyday and the exceptional. The combination of familiarity and extraordinariness gives the celebrity its ideological power. (2002: 232)

Walker (in Dyer 1999: 22), for his part, has signalled the coming of sound as the main reason for the loss of film stars' divine status, for their voice made them look, and specially sound, more real and less inscrutable. Dixon, meanwhile, has argued that such a shift in representation was also the direct result of the changing mood during the Depression years and the studios' desire to morally regenerate the film industry after several scandals involving notorious actors, which had dented the industry's moral status (2003: 88). Stars could no longer be shown to be leading a luxury lifestyle, but a more restrained one. Accordingly, stars started to be constructed or presented as average citizens that had been casually discovered and turned into film stars as a result of hard work. In this way, they became living embodiments of the American Dream and perpetuated the bourgeois myth of democratic access to Hollywood stardom, while also effectively hiding the highly stratified structure of the star system and its underlying history of exploitation (Dyer 1999: 42; McDonald 1999: 196; Marshall 2002: 235). In addition, inasmuch as stardom depends on the stars' popularity among ordinary members of the audience, popular actors were understood to form part of a truly "democratic elite" (McDonald 1999: 197). In a way, stars became then typical, ordinary, rather than magnificent human beings and they were presented as normal people, one of us, only hugely attractive, popular and very lucky.[2] Stars were still special, yet they could be imitated on a smaller scale, hence the ongoing popularity of stars as marketing devices or as models to be imitated (Eckert 1991; Herzog and Gaines 1991; Stacey 1994; Church Gibson 2004).

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[2] For example, this is what some of Harrison Ford's fans have to say on this matter: "Harrison […] doesn't flaunt his status as a celebrity, he just loves to act. When I watch his movies, I feel like I know him" (Breeze); "I feel he is appealing because he is a very modest man. He is the ideal strong, handsome, silent male that we do not see much of anymore" (GFranzwa); "I believe him in each and every movie" (Yael); "I like HF because he's so honest and non-conceited. He's a wonderful actor and the type of guy you feel you can count on. Also he's very sexy in a quiet, boyish sort of way" (Jeff). Source: http://apartment42.com/fav_poll.htm.
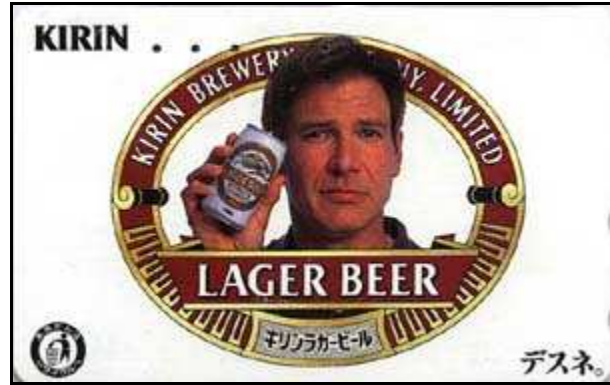
Harrison Ford's 1999 advertisements for the Lancia Lybra (Italy) and Kirin Lager beer (Japan): we too can drink and drive like a movie star.

Stars, by virtue of their ideal lives and status, have been understood to be particularly successful exemplars of individual subjectivity within a consumer society, and the ease with which such an exemplary and successful nature is conveyed, together with the stars' alleged ordinary nature, naturalises the image and the particular cultural meanings stars embody, whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexuality or nationality. In Dyer's words,

> stars have a major control over the representation of people in society and how people are represented as being in the mass media is going to have some kind of influence (even if only reinforcement) on how people are in society. Stars have a privileged position in the definition of social roles and types, and this must have real consequences in terms of how people believe they can and should behave. (1999: 8)

The fundamental star paradox is that stars can do this despite our awareness that their stunning image is largely illusory, constructed. In other words, we seem to love the lie. Moreover, their iconicity clearly presents the audience with an ideal which is almost impossible for ordinary mortals to fulfil, even though the star seems to represent it effortlessly.

On the other hand, stars have on occasion been interpreted as representing traditional or core values that are or were threatened at a particular period, that is to say, ideal yet nostalgic standards that are difficult to sustain, let alone embody, for the majority of mortals. For example, Dyer has read Marilyn Monroe as an embodiment of contradictory sexual discourses which were in operation in the 1950s, the heyday of her success: she was the epitome of liberated sex yet simultaneously a symbol of purity, vulnerability and harmless femininity (1986: 19-66; 1999: 31). Julia Roberts, for her part, has been considered an important exemplar of contemporary 'post-feminist' femininity: vulnerable and sexually attractive without being threatening, yet not an innocent bimbo either (Dyer in Phillips 2000: 182-83; Deleyto 2003: 127-39). Harrison Ford, I believe, may be read in a similar fashion, particularly as regards his film production of the 1990s, a time during which he represented the epitome of

'post-feminist' masculinity: a powerful, heroic yet average family guy, or an everyman, as it is often put; he is strong and tough yet tender, loving and not afraid of displaying his vulnerability.[3] In addition, in his films he has often signified traditional values *à la* Longfellow Deeds in *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) or George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), such as the dignity of hard work, traditional family values and the honesty and decency of the common man. Not surprisingly, he has often been compared to or portrayed as an old-fashioned throwback to certain male stars of the classical period, such as James Stewart or Gary Cooper themselves, Robert Mitchum, Spencer Tracy, Cary Grant, Clark Gable or Errol Flynn (Pfeiffer and Lewis 1999: 118, 120, 145, 167, 245). In short, his persona, like Julia Roberts's, has the potential for appealing to men and women alike. No wonder Ford has become one of the most bankable stars of all time.

In this sense, the fascination of the star often lies in their potential for bringing together multiple, sometimes incompatible meanings while making them seem manageable (Monroe as naughty but nice, Roberts as sexually attractive and vulnerable yet in control; Ford as the fundamentally decent everyman that has heroic potential and can always save the day, and so on). In Phillips's words,

> stars are the 'magic' figures of popular cinema, the shamans who are capable of bringing about illusory solutions to real-life difficulties. [The star can offer] a fascinating synthesis of things an audience finds very difficult, if not impossible, to bring together in real life. (2000: 189-90)

The semiotic and (inter-)textual perspective heralded by Richard Dyer therefore claims that stars can be studied as cultural signs or texts that bring particular meanings to the film narrative. The work of Star Studies consists then in disclosing the several meanings that a particular star, or rather the persona or image of the star, contributes to the overall film narrative at a particular time.[4] Inasmuch as these meanings or signifieds are always ideological and culturally produced, they may be related to other cultural texts, that is to say, the ideology of the wider culture and/or historical period in which the star, or the work of the star, is produced,

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[3] Similar views have been expressed by some of his fans on the website http://apartment42.com: "Harrison Ford has a very unique acting style. It makes him seem very ordinary. He can turn an ordinary guy into a hero. That is very different from other actors. He doesn't need big muscles, just brains. Besides that, he is just very attractive" (Tara); "Forget the sensitive abilities of projecting believable bravery and sorrow; it's the scar. And the nose" (Erica); "I feel as though HF epitomizes the average citizen and how we would react in similar situations. Harrison doesn't insult our intelligence with the roles he portrays" (Jennita); "Harrison is one of the last of the Renaissance Men: he is sensitive and heroic, but more than that, he is a real person" (Breeze).

[4] Thompson's (1991) "commutation test", which basically consists in comparing different stars who have played the same role or in experimenting by substituting one star for another in a given film role, is an interesting way of exploring the meanings that certain stars bring to film narratives, i.e. their unique trademark and signifieds that allow the viewer to differentiate among different performers. Substituting Nicole Kidman for, say, Jodie Foster in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Whoopy Goldberg for Glenn Close in *Air Force One* (1997) or comparing Julia Ormond and Audrey Hepburn in the two *Sabrina* films (1954; 1995) or Jerry Lewis and Eddie Murphy in the two versions of *The Nutty Professor* (1963; 1996) are only some examples. One may also wonder if *JFK* (1991), *Traffic* (2000) or *Syriana* (2005) might have been altogether different films had Harrison Ford accepted the roles that Kevin Costner, Michael Douglas and George Clooney went on to play eventually, or had Costner agreed to play President James Marshall in *Air Force One*, for that matter. No doubt, the commutation test was a precursor of contemporary readings attempting to liken the specific mechanics of star images and star vehicles, in which stylistic, structural or iconographic continuities may be observed, to those of film genres (Dyer 1999: 62; Geraghty 2000: 190-91).

reproduced or interpreted. As Ndalianis has put it, "[the star's] persona explodes beyond the limits of a film, … impacting on the broader social milieu" (2002: xii).

Yet, since the persona of the star is always constructed through the integration of different highly manipulated texts (not only film roles or the actor's performance style, but also countless examples of film criticism, film posters, magazine articles, publicity photographs, biographies, promotional interviews, Internet sites, advertising, gossip columns, etc.), the real truth behind the screen roles and the artificial persona, the façade, can never be fully disclosed.[5] Indeed, as Watson claims, "stardom is only accessible to us through texts, and thus only exists as a text" (2003: 170). Surely, our interpretations of the image of the star are always 'true' yet they are also always lacking for they are contingent, subjective and partial, as well as based on performance and artificiality—even though the myth of the star's naturalness and authenticity, the notion that the real person and the public image make up a seamless whole, remains in many cases as strong as ever.[6] In other words, stars, who are both real people and representations of people, are nothing but "fictional truths" which offer both the possibility and impossibility of knowing the authentic individual (Mast in Ndalianis 2002: xv).

It is thus the gap existing between the real person (which may be revealed through publicity) and the constructed persona (which can be ascertained through promotional materials or film roles) that fuels the audience's desire to know more, to build a more authentic or substantial picture of the star, while also revealing any possible contradictions and ideological faultlines in her or his image. In trying to bridge the gap between the real person and the image, different meanings may be foregrounded by different spectators or groups of spectators, which may be in accordance or in contradiction, thereby revealing the complexly multi-layered, polysemic nature of the star image (Dyer 1986: 5). Those artificially generated meanings making up the star image may in turn be disclosed and contextualised within the wider cultural arena, thereby denaturalising—but perhaps also

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[5] Dyer has distinguished between materials for promotion and publicity. The former are generated and carefully managed by the studios, the star himself or herself, or the star's agent, whereas the latter circulate in various media but are beyond the star's control and are not always favourable in nature (1999: 60-63). Indeed, publicity relies on the public's desire to know more about the star and their attempts to disclose 'the hidden truth' behind the halo of the star. Such materials often focus on scandal and constitute a type of discourse that, from the early days of stardom, "exposed contradiction and problematised the moral closure of the professional and private images of stars" (McDonald 1999: 178). This fiction characterised the discourse on stardom, especially in earlier periods of Hollywood history, when studios groomed stars and were in total control of their image but it is still applicable to some contemporary stars. In this sense, publicity seems to be more authentic than promotional materials. Performance style and characterisation, especially in so-called star vehicles, are also essential in the construction of star personae. Certainly, characterisation helps build the bare essentials of the star's persona. On the other hand, characterisation and performance are often shaped around the star's image once it has been firmly established outside films. As Branston explains, stars then bring into films "the ghostly presence of their star image, whether off-screen or from celebrated film roles" (2000: 123). Harrison Ford's chilling performance as Norman Spencer in *What Lies Beneath* (2000) provides a good case in point.

[6] Indeed, it is virtually impossible to be aware of all the different texts making up the image of the star at once, which implies that knowledge of a star is always incomplete and different for each member of the audience. Moreover, McDonald is right in pointing out that "in constructing a context [against which to read the image of the star], … historical analysis is faced with a basic problem. How do we tell which texts are significant and which are not, and how many texts do we need to reconstruct a context convincingly? …. The networking of texts is an endless task, and the results can only provide the possible conditions within which a star's image may have been intelligible" (1995: 85-86). This implies that our readings may be well grounded, but can never be absolute. Information on the production of films and audience research may help close the gaps.

demystifying in the process—the powerful image of the star. In a nutshell, Star Studies attempts to make "visible that which seems invisible, even if provisionally" (McDonald 1995: 82).

Yet, Dyer has insisted that the meanings a star embodies at any particular time are not limitless (1999: 3). He introduces the concept of *structured polysemy*, whereby the star is understood to embody several interlocking but finite meanings. While some of these meanings may reinforce each other, others may contradict one another. In addition, not all the meanings comprising the image of the star are equally significant. Some may be foregrounded or relegated to the background under particular circumstances, such as an important event in an actor's life, a significant shift in an actor's career or, more commonly, a new film role. In the latter case, certain elements may be mobilised and displayed in such a way that the star image is seen to correspond with the features of the character (1) in a partial or selective way, in which case some meanings are foregrounded while others are put aside, as in *Random Hearts* (1999), with Ford playing taciturn police officer Dutch Van der Broeck; (2) in a seamless way, in which case the image of both actor and character become almost interchangeable, as in so-called star vehicles, like *Clear and Present Danger* (1994) or *Air Force One*; or (3) in a problematic way, in which case the star is seen to be cast against type or simply miscast, as in *The Mosquito Coast* (1986), *What Lies Beneath* or *K-19: the Widowmaker* (2002), thereby generating contradictory meanings which are not always appropriately conveyed, or discontinuities that are not well received by the public (Dyer 1999: 126-31).

Furthermore, the process of signification is in constant evolution since the intertextual process involved in star construction may expand and go on forever. In fact, with the ever-increasing horizontal expansion of media conglomerates, the cross-media production and marketing of the star has been firmly established (Ndalianis 2002: x). Therefore, not only may the star embody different meanings, with different degrees of importance, but these meanings evolve throughout time, as the star's career develops and more and more information becomes available. In addition, these meanings may be mobilised and processed in various ways, for star knowledge is widely dispersed and differently shared by the members of the audience. Thus, the image of a star can mean different things to different groups in society at the same moment. This, as Willis correctly points out, throws into question the extent to which stars are made by agents, marketing departments, or the stars themselves, rather than fans, or audiences more generally (2004: 2). In fact, discourses produced by devoted fans or by gossip can have a definite impact on the construction and consumption of the image of the film star which may on occasion surpass the material presented in films, magazines or newspapers—witness the case of Judy Garland and her huge gay following, or those of Tom Cruise and Jodie Foster and their much-discussed sexuality.

Indeed, star discourse had until recently been fairly closed to the public, the allegedly passive recipients of media discourses, but 'unofficial' fan sites devoted to a given performer or other sites such as www.imdb.com, where any film fan is allowed to post their small pieces of criticism, are clear evidence of the changing nature of star discourse and they demonstrate that the audience can also claim 'ownership' over the film text and, in particular, the star's image. These various interactive sites provide ample space for fan expression with the potential to reach millions of readers. Their likely impact, therefore, is arguably much larger than the traditional fan mail directed to the star via his or her agent or studio, or to fan magazines. Yet, since many unofficial fan sites have become virtual adoration shrines, they can be seen to

represent an expansion and continuation, rather than a disruption, of traditional promotional star discourse.[7] Other sites, such as the aforementioned www.imdb.com, www.youtube.com or www.rottentomatoes.com, however, do offer conflicting views on stars and their performances or films in general.

In addition, audiences may be seen to hold immense power inasmuch as a star's popularity depends on their desire to keep on 'loving the lie'. When a major star like Harrison Ford, voted in 1994 'Box-Office Star of the Century' by the National Association of Theater Owners, considers himself to be a 'public servant' in the nowadays unpredictable world of Hollywood, he may not be too far off the mark.[8] Certain stars' popularity seems to rely on the maintenance of a fairly homogeneous image, as in the cases of many a comedy or action star such as Jim Carrey, Sylvester Stallone and to a large extent Harrison Ford, or former TV soap stars such as Jennifer Aniston or Sarah Jessica Parker, rather than on their impersonating skills. Hence, experiments pushing the image of the performer too far may result in the star losing an important share of their popularity at the box office.

It is in fact undeniable that for stardom to exist the public and the favour of the public must be acknowledged. Yet, for years textual analysis took precedence over research on spectatorship or the actual audience for that matter. It was in the mid 1970s that psychoanalytic film critic Laura Mulvey paved the way for sustained research on the effects that films may have on the spectator, albeit an implicit one (1975). Her work attempted to analyse the spectatorial position that classical narrative cinema seemed to construct and, more specifically, the kinds of pleasure that audiences may derive from watching films or stars. This kind of research was not based on the study of the actual cinemagoer, but of the hypothetical or implied spectator, which in relation to classical Hollywood narrative cinema Mulvey concluded to be male. Even though cinema provides different kinds of pleasure, Mulvey and those that followed in her wake, chose to focus on visual pleasure, which in Mulvey's work is tantamount to saying (male) erotic pleasure in contemplation of the (female) sexual fetish. This feminist tradition, which highlighted the so-far little-acknowledged voyeuristic nature of cinema, considered Hollywood to be a deeply patriarchal institution catering for male heterosexual desire only. In so doing, these critical readings virtually ignored the potentially disruptive force of the female and gay gaze, although the gap was to be closed later.

With the later emergence of Cultural Studies during the 1980s and 1990s, psychoanalytical research on spectatorship was further criticised for being overly essentialist inasmuch as it focused on universalised constructions of abstract, and indeed passive, spectators and of the effects that films may have on them. Cultural Studies theorists claimed instead that different audiences can actively negotiate their relationship to the text, or the star, depending on their cultural background, personality, taste and devotion to the star. It was within this context that audience research, an innovative method relying on ethnographic research techniques, was established. Information was to be obtained from actual moviegoers by using surveys, letters, diaries and by carrying out interviews. Stacey's work is perhaps the

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[7] See for example, the forum on the site http://www.homestead.com/harrisonfordfqa, in which no disparaging comment against the star or his movies is allowed: "Blatant flaming of Harrison Ford, his movies, and/or people in the newsgroup is not tolerated". In practice, this means that moderators become virtual censors.

[8] Here is what the actor has to say about it: "I am nothing more than a worker in a service occupation …. It's like being a waiter or a gas-station attendant, but I'm waiting on six million of people a week if I'm lucky" (in Jenkins 1998: 287).

most representative. In *Star Gazing* (1994), she charted the very different kinds of pleasure that the particular cinemagoers she researched derived from looking at their favourite stars, the different kinds of identification that were established and the different ways in which their identification was actualised. Some of the respondents simply declared their devotion to the star but did not try to imitate her; others adopted stars as role models whose personality they admired and tried to imitate; others preferred to emphasize a physical trait they shared with the star, while others copied their fashions or hairstyle; others recalled playing at being the star, and so on.

However, for all its advantages, audience research is not without its problems. Aside from the expense and massive logistics involved, it should be emphasized that our memories are deceptive, which compromises the validity of the findings. In addition, much of this research is carried out anonymously, relying on letters, surveys or via the Internet, which yet again casts a shadow of doubt over the utter reliability of the gathered information. Finally, one may speculate that manipulation or the partial selection of opinions on the part of researchers in order to validate their initial hypotheses may be possible. In conclusion, this kind of research is invaluable for the kind of 'fly-on-the-wall' information that it provides, but, like other forms of research, it cannot be considered to be final or entirely objective.

It is now widely argued that textual analysis provides a subjective reading of stars that cannot be considered to be definitive, although informed critical readings do still provide a serious yardstick for analysis. As suggested above, readings or memories provided by fans may be just as tainted by subjectivity, perhaps even more so, than academic readings of a star image. Conversely, even if the general validity of a particular scholar's reading has been tested among actual cinemagoers, it will inevitably remain culturally and historically specific. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that star images are made up of a multiplicity of discourses which are open to change over time, which neither wholly validates nor invalidates any particular reading. The complex, polysemic structure of the star image allows for various readings, which audiences and critics produce depending on their own interests, their knowledge about the star and the context in which the star is produced or discussed. Just as star images can be interpreted as embodiments of some, but not all, ideological discourses present in a given culture, no single analysis can attempt to uncover each and every one of the meanings enclosed in the image of a star. The more information is gathered, the closer will we get to understanding what stars signify. Therefore, scholarly textual readings should be complemented with research on audience and critical reception, as well as industrial information regarding the production of star images, whenever possible.

Stars have indeed played a key role in the development and success of the film industry, especially after the 1910s. As explained above, early cinema focused on the spectacle provided by the new technology, rather than the performers themselves, who were not credited and went almost unnoticed. Cameras were positioned in such a way that the screen resembled a theatre stage, which created distance between the spectator and the performer. However, with the transition to narrative cinema in the second decade of the 20th century, as well as with the redefinition of screen space, audiences started to 'notice' and become interested in those anonymous performers that regularly appeared on the screen ('the girl with the curls', 'the fat guy' and so on), even before the creation of on-screen credits, lobby posters or fan magazines (Butler 1998: 344). The film star was about to be born. With the later introduction of film magazines, which featured pieces discussing the plots of new releases but also the work and private lives of the actors, the star system

became established. From then on, the stars' importance within the industry would continuously increase due to their marketable value as both labour (i.e. as performers) and capital (i.e. as economic assets, brands or marketing devices generating public demand, securing financing and, hopefully, ensuring profits) (Marshall 2002: 228). During the studio era, that is, from the late 1920s and well into the 1960s, actors were tied to the studios for an average period of seven years, during which time they had very little room for manoeuvre and had to acquiesce to whatever decisions the studio managers made, whether in terms of contracts, film roles or public image. Generally speaking, the studios were in total control of the stars and other character actors on their payroll, who were often typecast in order to cater for the audience's "expectation of constancy" as Barry King has put it, and provide them with the pleasures of continuity and predictability—a John Wayne film, a Bette Davies drama, a Jerry Lewis or a Doris Day comedy (2003: 47).

With the fall of the studio system during the second half of the 20th century, stars became freelancers on an open market who, together with their agents, were free to decide on their next career move. With decreased film production, acting opportunities diminished, but the most popular stars' salaries increased exponentially for within the new system of production they performed an essential part in the marketing, and production, of the film commodity. As Branston argues, "a major star [is] a brand which is definable as an image which persuades consumers of a product's quality prior to purchase or experience. This translates for cinema into 'a performer who can open a film on the strength of their name alone'" (2000: 110). Even in today's uncertain climate, with increasingly unpredictable audience response, the presence of a star can make or break a financing deal, and indeed they have become the focal selling point in the new package-deal system operating in contemporary Hollywood.[9] In fact, according to Allen,

> in the absence of any other strategy or element capable of attracting the huge potential returns that come with a box-office hit, highly paid stars are the best option currently available. Actors are therefore the central focus … around which mainstream American filmmaking is constructed. They are the main attraction for audiences deciding which film to see, the lead element in the package which now determines whether a film project will be green-lighted. In a character- and narrative-driven film system, they will always command centre stage. (2003: 132, 139)

Yet, with Hollywood film production involving escalating costs, the presence of the star may undeniably generate massive profits but also make a company go bankrupt if the film does not perform as well as expected; hence the necessity for stars to do more than 'just act' in order to justify their massive salaries. They have to generate interest by attending premieres around the world, engaging in film advertising, promotional interviews, photo shoots, endorsing and sporting film merchandising and so on. Their role is essential in turning the film into an event. In short, film stars are immensely valued for their ability to generate hype, buzz, and especially for their ability to remain popular among the public and, if possible, break

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[9] The package unit or deal system usually involves an important actor, his or her agent, and other important stakeholders, such as the director, scriptwriter and co-stars, all being sold as a block to a studio wishing to back and finance the project (Allen 2003: 119). The new system inevitably implies a shorter life-span for many a star for now, more than ever, they are only worth as much as their latest movie.

box-office records on a film's opening weekend. Their popular appeal, or 'bankability' in marketing terms, is so precious that it is often seen to justify their inflated salaries:

> for the industry, the stars' economic value transcends the nature of their work and thus their wages far outstrip those earned by generally unionized film workers. The celebrity's independent connection to the audience permits the configuration of a separate system of value for his or her contribution to any film. This connection to the audience is on an affective or emotional level that defies clear-cut quantification of its economic import. (Marshall 2002: 231)

Within the actor-led package system, many stars are also granted other enormous benefits, such as the right to approve of or refuse acting partners or directors, as well as the right to effect changes in the script and final cut. Allen, in fact, considers the star to be the major creative force in today's Hollywood production:

> actors [have come] increasingly to select their own material, fashion that material into a workable script, and then to realise that scripted vision. In this context, we might argue that the actor [has started to act] as the film's *auteur*, the central force that can change and mould a film's shape and narrative drive. (2003: 124)

For example, it is well known that Harrison Ford and Brad Pitt confronted each other during the shooting of *The Devil's Own* (1997), due to the changes that Ford insisted be made to the script so that his character would gain equal standing to Pitt's and could be portrayed more positively. Ford's character then turned from a dishevelled police officer to "a well-mannered, job-devoted, family-oriented man". Pitt went on to blame the relative failure of the film on those "irresponsible" script changes (Duke 2005: 225). However, other celebrated characters and moments in Ford's filmography are due to his contributions, even before he became a major star, such as Bob Falfa's white cowboy hat in George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973), the ad-libbed "boring conversation, anyway" moment in *Star Wars* (1977), the "I love you—I know" dialogue between Han Solo and Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) or, most famously, the sabre man's expedient shooting in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981).


3. Star Studies Today

Pitt and Ford's aforementioned dispute is a clear indication of the hierarchical system that characterises the star system in Hollywood. This hierarchy is pre-eminently based on economic principles (that is, the highest paid star 'rules'), but within the acting profession, and the wider cultural arena, a different kind of artistic hierarchy operates. Some actors may be respected for their box-office appeal while others may be admired for their acting abilities. The former usually feature in Hollywood's most commercial or mainstream enterprises (say, Orlando Bloom, Cameron Diaz, Harrison Ford or Will Smith), whereas the latter excel in performance rather than at the box office (say, Al Pacino, Sean Penn or Meryl Streep), which means that they can risk a number of flops without much dent being made to their prestige. It is only rarely that an actor may be considered to be representative of both categories, although popular

exceptions, such as multiple-award winners Jodie Foster or Tom Hanks, as well as multiple-award nominee Johnny Depp, stand out.

This artistic differentiation characterises the Hollywood star system today, which contrasts with the situation in the studio era, where the cultivation of personalities was valued over and above 'artistic pretension' or acting skills. The prevalence of computer-generated, special-effects studded, action-packed blockbusters has arguably conferred added value to the performing abilities displayed by (human) actors since, as Geraghty has argued, "acting has become a way of claiming back the cinema for human stars" (2000: 192). Not surprisingly, performances in blockbusters, or in comedies, are seldom considered award-winning material, even though some stars, such as Harrison Ford, insist on playing most of their own stunts, thus providing another way in which the human element in action cinema can be retained.[10] Likewise, more and more A-list actors, such as George Clooney, Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, Brad Pitt or Kevin Spacey, are taking up roles in small independent film productions or at the theatre in an attempt to give an aura of artistic prestige to their work. In addition, it may well be argued that in today's celebrity-obsessed world, film stars are trying to vindicate their work and differentiate themselves from other celebrities with whom they share the limelight and whose only claim to fame is often to be found in their widely publicised lifestyle. As Allen has noted,

> the desired goal for the actor in such exercises—apart from, admittedly, in certain cases a true desire for a different acting experience—is to garner positive reviews about the actor's ability to pull off a coherent and believable performance, live—i.e. 'real' acting … In attempting these … roles, stars are attempting to win the critical kudos, and audience acceptance, which will confirm their eminence within the industry. (2003: 126-27, 129)

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[10] Jim Carrey, Sylvester Stallone or Ben Stiller may never win Academy awards, but for different reasons. Blockbusters and action films in general may well exemplify cinema's 'deskilling' process, even though the danger and courage involved in filming action scenes may be emphasised in some cases. Yet, a comedian's acting skills are essential for a performance and a comedy film to work, but as Drake suggests, comedy, and physical comedy in particular, is still considered to be of lower cultural value, and therefore, comedians' performances are seldom rewarded (2004).
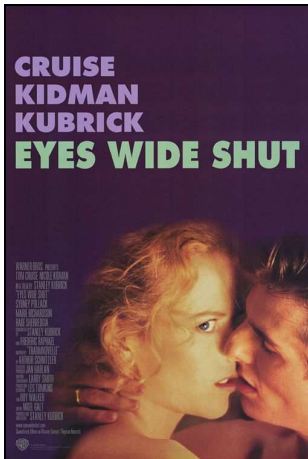
Kidman and Cruise go arty in Kubrick's last film (1999); Jason Biggs and Alicia Silverstone in the Broadway production of *The Graduate* (2002).

This need for differentiation has been well noted within academic Film Studies, inasmuch as it has become necessary to establish which aspects make a media celebrity, such as socialite Paris Hilton and other *glitterati*, different from a sports star or a film star. Gledhill has argued that cinema once provided "the ultimate confirmation of stardom", but this is no longer so, as one can easily verify by taking a cursory glance at the mass media (1991: xiii). In addition, within the world of cinema itself, we can find that film stars now coexist with star directors, star producers and even animated or digital stars, such as Homer Simpson, Buzz Lightyear or the various Disney princesses. Therefore, it has become necessary to explore, rethink and update the notion of film stardom and the ways in which it is differently articulated today. In this respect, Geraghty has identified three main forms of articulation or modes, which may apply differently to different film stars: the film star as *celebrity*, *professional*, and *performer* (2000).

Gossip and information about one's private life predominates in the construction of the celebrity, over and above discussions of the celebrity's professional career or artistic achievements, whose significance is only relative within this mode. Celebrities, whether from the film, TV, music or sports world, are the staples of the sensationalist media, which constantly flood us with endless accounts of their private lives or their latest indiscretions. The degree to which the celebrity mode is seen to characterise a particular actor's image ranges widely. For instance, Penélope Cruz was, until her Oscar nomination in 2007, probably more of a celebrity than, say, Harrison Ford or Kevin Spacey, for within the media Cruz's private life had been discussed far more often than her professional career in Hollywood. In fact, in today's media-saturated world, it is probably no longer necessary to have watched Cruz's films in order to be aware of her existence as a celebrity (Watson 2003: 174). The same could be said about Lindsay Lohan or Ashton Kutcher, both of whom are arguably better known for their very public private lives than their acting skills. If, as deCordova (1991) has documented, at the beginning of the 20th century the emergence of the picture personality (a performer) and the discourse on acting preceded that of the film star (a performer with a biography) and the discourse on private life, one hundred years later the tables seem to have been turned. As a matter of fact, it has become virtually impossible for any popular performer relying on promotion and their own ability to generate interest to escape this particular mode of representation, especially after a particular box-office failure, or in between film projects. This may well have been Harrison Ford's case. The actor, who has always

prided himself in participating in one film project, or less, per year saw his box-office clout severely compromised at the beginning of the present decade as a result of the poor economic performance of some of his more recent films, to which the release of the latest episode in the Indiana Jones saga, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), is expected to put an end.
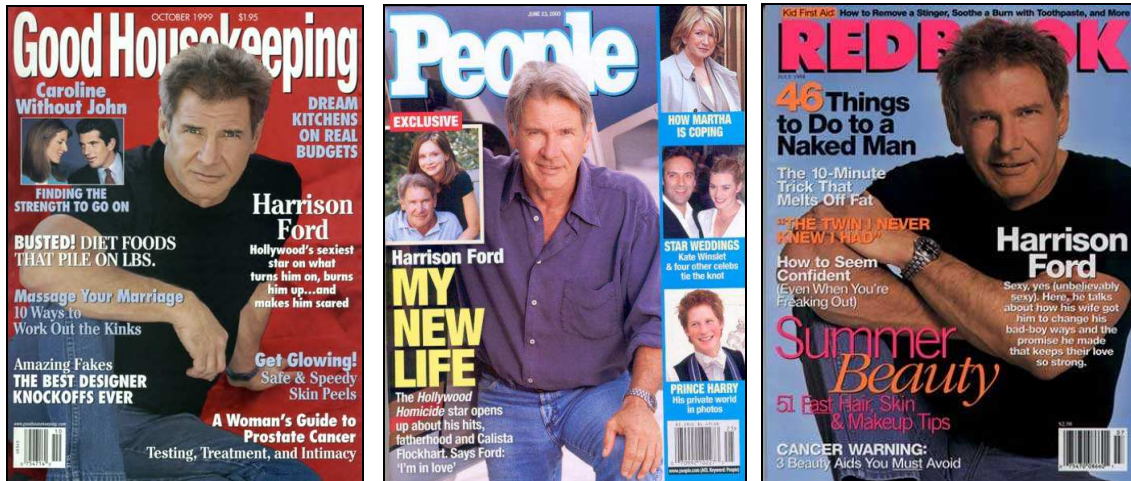
Harrison Ford and the celebrity mode: the actor discusses marriage, love, fatherhood, what turns him on and what makes him scared, as well as his film hits, in the non-cinema press.

According to Geraghty, nevertheless, Ford is a particularly good example of the second mode she has identified, i.e. the star as professional, although Jennifer Aniston, Clint Eastwood, Jack Nicholson, Julia Roberts, Sylvester Stallone, or Robin Williams may be considered to provide other good examples (2000: 190-91). This mode relies to a large extent on the existence of a well-established continuity, or in Dyer's terms 'fit', between the star's public image and the film roles that have brought him or her fame. So much so, that actors often risk losing the public's favour if they are seen to deviate from their established personae too noticeably. In this sense, Ford's well-known insistence on performing his own stunts can be considered to be an extreme form of personification. Not surprisingly, he recently declared: "I used to get very annoyed when people used this comparison but now I understand it to be true—you're not just an actor, you become a *brand*" (in Bardin 2003: 120, emphasis in the original).[11]

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[11] Ford himself seems to be well aware of his own status within the acting profession: "there are people that are more likely to be celebrated for their acting skills, and there are other people, who, perhaps, even by nature of their own taste, are less likely to be *caught* acting and thus, not celebrated. I'm fine with that" (in Bardin 2003: 120, emphasis in the original).
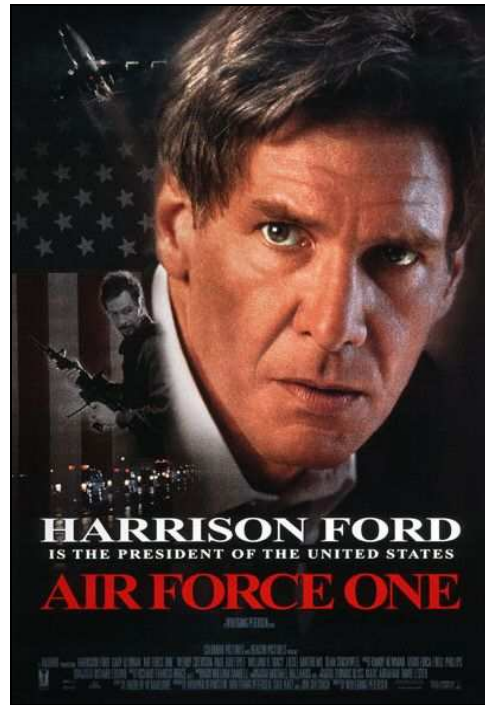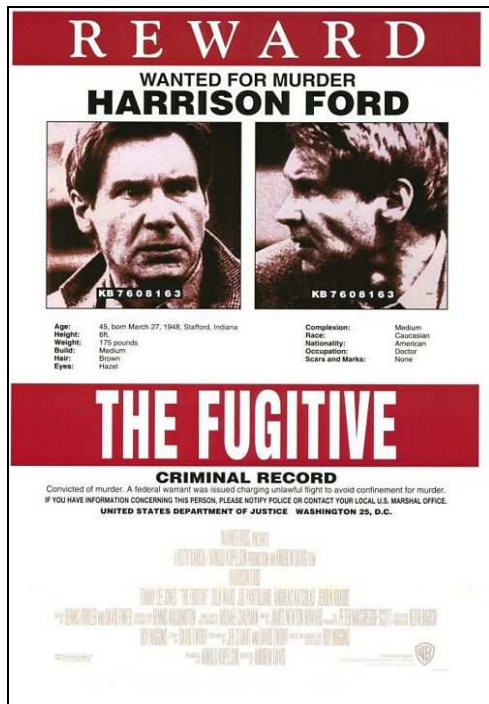
Harrison Ford and the professional mode. *The Fugitive*'s 1993 tagline formula was successfully repeated in *Air Force One*: "Harrison Ford is the President of the U.S." It was such a wonderful example of personification that Ford became Clinton's Internet 'rival' for the presidency in 1998.

The star-as-professional mode clearly represents a continuation in the cultivation of personalities characterising the studio era, a time during which star and role became a whole and scripts were written with a particular star in mind. For these performers, there is little room for manoeuvre in Hollywood's high-cost, high-risk environment, and it may be the case that they are only temporarily 'allowed' to play against type if they are seen to return to their established image, or franchise, in future film projects (Allen 2003: 128). The latest instalment in the Indiana Jones saga, starring Harrison Ford, exemplifies this premise. Rocky Balboa's, John McClane's and Rambo's recent, and relatively successful, comebacks in *Rocky Balboa* (2006), *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007) and *Rambo* (2008), respectively, have provided further evidence.

Generally speaking, the star-as-professional mode is seen to contrast with Geraghty's third and last category, the star-as-performer, for in the latter it is the actor's performance or acting skills that are foregrounded, over and above questions referring to their private life or public image. As suggested earlier, a logical consequence of the fact that the star-as-professional relies on the existence of a perfect image-role correlation is the widespread but misleading belief that professionals do not act, or 'work' for that matter, but 'perform themselves'.[12]

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[12] This circumstance, as Lovell stresses, does not necessarily imply that performers within this category are inevitably bad actors, but may in fact be an indication that their range is limited (2003: 263). Certain performers may be more suited to certain roles or genres than others. Likewise, workers in other areas may be more skilful when dealing with certain tasks than others, which does not necessarily diminish their value as workers.
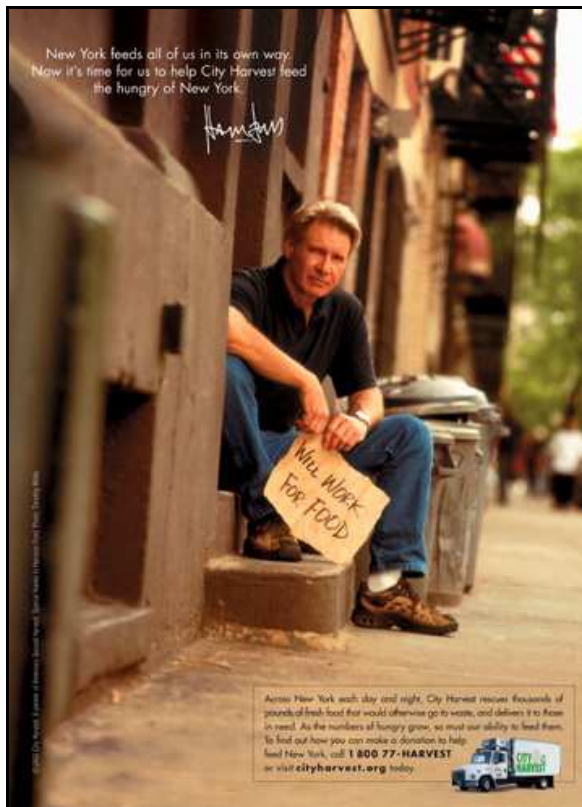
"Will work for food": some stars do not 'work', they only play themselves, but they will do it for charity.

The value of the star-as-performer, however, lies in their renowned impersonating skills and their ability to pull off believable performances in a wide range of characterisations and genres, but also, in many cases, their overall rejection of Hollywood's commercialism, coupled with their artistic aspirations and readiness to favour risky acting enterprises in the era of the blockbuster. Hollywood performers that would fit into this category would include, famously, veterans Robert de Niro, Al Pacino, Susan Sarandon and Meryl Streep, but also Sean Penn, Philip Seymour-Hoffman or Hilary Swank. It is by foregrounding and vindicating their work as serious performing artists that these actors seek to legitimate and maintain their standing in the overcrowded world of contemporary fame, while also reclaiming "some of the cultural prestige of film stardom" (Watson 2003: 176). Not surprisingly, despite their vocal rejection of Hollywood's money-driven tendencies, they are the ones that reap the majority of the industry's awards.

As Geraghty reminds us, these three modes should not be regarded as tightly closed and independent, but may coexist to a greater or lesser extent within a particular star's image. As she stresses,

> in a situation of intense competition for the extratextual attention of the media, there are choices, for audiences and stars, about whether to exploit the full range of mass media exposure or to establish pleasures around stardom which are specifically related to the film text and to cinema … The different modes of stardom … require different kinds of knowledge from audiences and although

some film stars do operate as celebrities, knowledge of this is not essential to understanding their film appearances. (2000: 188, 195)

This may be exemplified by making reference to Harrison Ford once again, a paradigmatic example of the star-as-professional category, whose media exposure as a celebrity has accelerated ever since his apparently solid marriage to scriptwriter Melissa Mathison broke down in 2004 and the actor became involved with his present partner, Calista Flockhart, and various other celebrities before her. The increased focus on his personal life, moreover, seemed to coincide with a string of flops at the box-office at the beginning of the 2000s. The publicity that his celebrity side has granted him, as well as the much-hyped and highly successful Indiana Jones comeback, may be seen to compensate for the lacklustre reception of his latest movies. Therefore, Ford exemplifies Geraghty's claim that the different modes may coexist within a particular star's image, which helps us understand the ways in which the film industry, and film stardom in particular, operates these days.

Star Studies continues to be a fruitful area of academic research despite its relatively short history. However, since the majority of box-office hits today are animated films or special-effects studded franchises with relatively unknown performers—in 2007, *Spider-Man 3, Shrek the Third* and *Transformers*, together with *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* and *Harry Potter and the Order of The Phoenix* were the major winners at the international box office—it remains to be seen where the next stage in this area of study will lead us to.[13]

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