Performing Across Boundaries: Nicole Kidman's meaningful intertextuality as
contemporary female star

by Jessica Aldred

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Carleton University
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Jessica Aldred

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Abstract

This thesis examines the Hollywood career narrative of Nicole Kidman as an exemplary model of the possibilities and limitations facing the contemporary female star striving for lasting cultural recognition as a performer. Through Kidman, this thesis traces how Method-influenced conceptions of culturally-valued screen acting have tended to favour male stars rather than female ones, who are more readily expected to function as spectacle both on-screen and in the media. The challenges of ‘transformative authenticity’ (performance that is both self-revelatory and narratively-believable) to the female star will be better understood through close textual analysis of Kidman’s screen performances and the media discourses that surround them. Kidman’s model of stardom elucidates how intertextual performance — combining definitive screen performances with careful public persona management and re-negotiation via intersecting media ‘performances’ — may provide one workable, if tenuous, avenue for the female star to function as active creator of meaning rather than passive recipient of it.

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I am indebted to Peter for turning a blind eye as stacks of newspapers, magazines, and books began to appear in every room in the house, and propping me back up whenever I began to droop. Kudos to Charlie for being an excellent footwarmer. And last but not least, a big thank you to my mom, who, whenever I got stressed, reminded me that *her* M.A. thesis involved firing a starter pistol behind unsuspecting athletes and describing their reactions.

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Introduction

So obsessed is our culture with the media star, that new terms like “super star” and “mega star” have been coined in order to put in place a new and expanding hierarchy: those who are truly and specially “gifted” (the super and mega) now exist on a plane above the semi-gifted who continue to enter the ranks stardom at an exponential (and, some would say, indiscriminate) rate. Contemporary society is saturated by media signs and representations that seek to glorify — and thus make economically viable — a diverse range of media personae.¹

To remain relevant within the volatile climate of contemporary stardom, film stars must now work infinitely harder to set themselves apart, not just from their fellow actors, but also from the misbehaving pop stars and reality TV rejects that overpopulate what Angela Ndalians terms the “new and expanding hierarchy” of post-globalization fame. The cultural significance of the film star — once ensured through the big-screen ‘magic’ of feature films and the swirl of publicity and promotion that surrounded them — can no longer be taken for granted. Within the film industry, the star must now negotiate for artistic space amid the computer-generated special effects, high-concept film formats, and big ‘name’ directors that are promoted with the same enthusiasm once reserved exclusively for the star name on the marquee.² Within a North American cultural context of seemingly infinite media discourses, meanwhile, film stars face a seemingly paradoxical situation. On one hand, they must give distinctive, even definitive film performances that elevate them above the increasing disposability of the very title ‘star,’

¹ Angela Ndalians, “Introduction,” in *Stars in Our Eyes: The Star Phenomenon in the Contemporary Era*, eds. Angela Ndalians and Charlotte Henry (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000), vii.

² For an overview of the shifting nature of stardom in ‘new’ Hollywood, see Martin Barker, “Introduction,” in *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, eds. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker (London: Oxford Press, 2003), 1-24.

devalued as it has become by an accelerated “celebrification” process that lauds the sensational antics of the ‘semi-gifted’ as readily it does accomplishments of the truly talented.³ However, in order to rise above the clutter, the star must also participate in celebrity discourse in order to draw attention to and validate the creative achievements that set the ‘super’ or ‘mega’ star apart. As this study intends to show, this negotiation between film performance and media-established persona in order to achieve lasting cultural relevance has and continues to be decidedly more complex for the female star, whose career longevity is already endangered by ageist Hollywood standards of feminine beauty and a relative dearth of quality roles for women.

Christine Geraghty’s recent re-definition of film stardom provides a provocative — if somewhat troubling — starting point for any discussion of contemporary female stardom and performance. Geraghty outlines three distinct categories wherein the film star may attempt to carve out an enduring, meaningful career: star-as-performer (who foregrounds their artistry and range as an actor), star-as-professional (who puts forth a unified screen persona across a series of films, usually of the same genre), and star-as-celebrity (whose off screen persona takes precedence over on-screen work.)⁴ Ranked according to their perceived cultural value with ‘performer’ placed at the top of the hierarchy and ‘celebrity’ at the bottom, these categories are also divided according to

³ A recent issue of *Us* magazine provides a concrete example. Under the heading ‘Stars-They’re Just Like Us,’ (a regular feature in the magazine depicting stars in ‘every day,’ unglamorous situations), only one of the ‘stars’ pictured was a bona fide film star (Cameron Diaz), while, of the other four shown, two were reality-TV personalities, one was a television star/pin-up, and one was a model/reality TV personality. See Sarah Tomczak, “Stars, They’re Just Like Us,” *Us Weekly*, 24 May 2004, 26-27.

⁴ Christine Geraghty, “Re-examining stardom: questions of texts, bodies, and performance,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill & Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 183-201.

gender. For Geraghty, the male star possesses a relative monopoly on the loftiest rank of star-performer, while female stars have access only to the ‘lowest’ category of celebrity stardom, wherein film performances — and indeed, the very craft of acting — figure minimally in shaping public perception of the star in question.⁵ Although the gendered fixity of Geraghty’s categories seems extreme, they reflect a prevalent line of thinking within both contemporary scholarship and contemporary culture: while male star-performers are recognized for memorable roles that fuse the self-revelatory nature of Method acting with a contemporary emphasis on realistic physical and vocal transformation, female stars tend to be more readily discussed in terms of their consumable public images, personal relationships, and fashion or beauty preferences. Both types of stardom are played out on the body of the star. But while the former highlights the body as a site of artistic creation and performance, and is viewed as the means through which the actor’s vivid inner world is acted out, the latter simply foregrounds the body as spectacle — static, couture-clad, and most often judged in relation to whose arm she is on. This division is predicated largely on the fact that Method-influenced, culturally-valued performance has traditionally been more difficult for the female star to accomplish, doubly bound as she is by her own fetishized glamour and proper expectations of female behaviour and bodily containment.⁶

This thesis will focus upon a female star whose image appears to both engage with and problematize these gendered categories of contemporary film stardom and their apparent division between active/culturally-valued male and passive/culturally-disposable female. As a rare combination of glamorous media personality and acclaimed actor

⁵ Ibid., 187-188.

⁶ Ibid., 197-198.

renowned for her increasingly diverse roles, Nicole Kidman provides a compelling contemporary example of how the female star can function as *intertextual* performer, utilizing both film and celebrity media discourses in an effort to achieve lasting cultural value. Although much recent work in star and acting studies — including that of Geraghty — has opted to examine film performances and media representations as separate spheres wherein the star makes meaning, this study will demonstrate that there has never been a more prescient time to investigate them in relation to one another. Recuperating and updating the intertextual, polysemic model of stardom proposed by Richard Dyer's influential work in the late 70s and 80s will therefore be central to this project.⁷ After all, fandom is no longer a strict prerequisite for star knowledge. Aided by the Internet, a multi-channel satellite/digital television universe, and the widespread crossover of celebrity journalism into mainstream news outlets, our current state of star saturation ensures that a vast majority of potential film goers have at least some awareness of the contemporary star that extends beyond screen performance.⁸

With this broader audience of star consumption in mind, this thesis will explore, through Kidman, how a carefully-managed relationship between star acting and media-constructed persona (especially within interviews) can work for and against the female star. Kidman's model suggests that the intersections between film and media discourses

⁷ See, for example, Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1998); *Heavenly Bodies* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

⁸ It could be argued, for example, that greater effort would be expended in trying to maintain one's ignorance of Jennifer Lopez' latest marriage than in receiving information about it. No fewer than four entertainment programs (*Entertainment Tonight*, *Access Hollywood*, *E Talk Daily*, *E Now*) devoted extensive lead segments to Lopez's surprise June wedding to Mark Anthony, while three prominent weekly magazines (*Us Weekly*, *InTouch*, and *People*) devoted cover stories to it. A cursory web search yielded dozens of related articles.

can function to carve out cultural recognition for the female star, creating a legitimating cycle of discourses that stress the valuable 'work' of her performance at the same time as they emphasize her complete naturalness and authenticity in that particular role, no matter how different it may be from the role that preceded it. However, the fact that, over the past year, Kidman has succeeded (with *The Hours*), failed (*The Human Stain*), and met with middling success (*Cold Mountain*) in her attempts at acclaimed performance seems to suggest that volatility and a certain degree of contingency defines the intertextual star-performer. Therefore, also central to this study will be the question of whether or not this mode can be viewed as a progressive possibility for the female star.

This thesis will examine Kidman's star image as structured during her 15-year Hollywood career within film roles and surrounding media texts, which include critical reviews, the interviews Kidman has given, and the inevitable gossip columns and opinion pieces that surround her. This scrutiny of the film and media texts surrounding Kidman will prompt a series of questions. How does Kidman's star image shift and evolve over the years, and how is it affected by intersections between her private-yet-publicly-available life and her film roles? What role does Kidman's public humanization via divorce play in her subsequent acceptance as emotionally-authentic actress? To what extent do Kidman's interviews function as a form of self-revelatory performance, analogous to the kind of 'inside-out' emotionality favoured by Method actors?

In developing my argument, it will be necessary to situate Kidman within the broader context of how certain definitions of culturally-valued film performance have tended to exclude or marginalize the female star. This will involve a consideration of how current conceptions of 'quality' acting have been influenced by the literature,

teaching, and popular rhetoric surrounding Method acting and Method-influenced performance. I will thus briefly address the following questions: what is the relationship between Stanislavski's teachings and Strasberg's adaptation of them into the 'Method?' What are the visual and audible signs that delineate a Method-influenced performance? How has cinematic method acting changed since its popularization in the 50s? Of course, a close analysis of Kidman's acting style and technique will also be essential to assessing to what extent her work embodies the characteristics of culturally-valued film performance.

Kidman's image at the outset of her North American film career conforms almost perfectly to Geraghty's notion of the female star as celebrity spectacle, attaining stardom primarily through her striking appearance and her marriage to Hollywood superstar Tom Cruise. Despite appearing in a number of high-profile films, Kidman's association with Cruise combined with her apparent coolness both on screen and off to create a widespread impression of her as a cold, opportunist celebrity wife simply playing herself across a series of films. But Kidman's icy star image undergoes a significant revision and subsequent shift towards performance via the public spectacle of her divorce from Cruise — due not only to Kidman's 'real life' performance of bravery and vulnerability in the public eye, but also to a pair of gruelling roles in *Moulin Rouge* (Baz Luhrmann, 2001) and *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) that showcased this newly-authenticated Kidman image, albeit in drastically different ways. This shift towards performance finds its fullest realization in Kidman's Oscar-winning portrayal of Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002), which features a virtually unrecognizable

Kidman displaying the kind of emotional, vocal, and physical commitment to craft most readily associated with male Method actors.

Chapter One will provide a brief overview of the relevant academic literature surrounding stardom and acting, making a case for the renewed importance of studying stars as intertextual constructions of both screen performances and media discourse. The indebtedness of current conceptions of ‘great’ screen acting to Lee Strasberg’s version of the Method will be considered, especially for the limitations it has tended to impose on the female performer. The contemporary move towards what Barry King terms “impersonation,”⁹ or the disappearance of the star into a narratively-believable character, will be addressed, particularly how it is now fused with Method-influenced self-revelation to achieve what will be referred to as ‘transformative authenticity,’ the current standard by which culturally-valued acting is evaluated. This chapter will conclude with a consideration of how the shift towards transformative authenticity has not necessarily opened up the playing field for the female star, unless her media-established persona is carefully managed in relation to this type of performance.

Chapter Two will begin a chronological consideration of Kidman’s career in relation to her evolution as intertextual performer. This chapter will focus on Kidman’s arrival in Hollywood in 1989 with the stateside success of the Australian thriller *Dead Calm* (Phillip Noyce, 1989), and her subsequent decade-long struggle for artistic legitimacy while married to Cruise. Kidman’s performance in *Dead Calm* will be examined not only for the visible markers of cultural worth it exemplifies, but also for

⁹ Barry King, “Articulating Stardom,” in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 167-182.

how its largely positive reception was neither helped nor hindered by an established Kidman star persona. This will be followed by a close examination of how the media representations and film performances that followed Kidman's marriage to Cruise intersected to form an icy, unsympathetic public persona. Kidman's misunderstood attempts at acclaimed, transformative performance will be evaluated through a consideration of her acting and its critical reception in *To Die For* (Gus Van Sant, 1995) and *Portrait of a Lady* (Jane Campion, 1996). The signifying power of Kidman's physical appearance will be considered in relation to all three of these performances, and to her performances in *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999) and the David Hare play *The Blue Room* (Sam Mendes, 1999).

Chapter Three will examine how the transformation and humanization of Kidman's public persona through divorce becomes vital to the perceived emotional authenticity of her film performances in *Moulin Rouge* and *The Others*. It will consider how the proximity of these two performances — to one another and to Kidman's triumphant bravery in the media — prompted widespread acknowledgement of Kidman's range as an actor and praise for the aspects of culturally-valued performance present in both films. The legitimating force of Kidman's emotional 'openness' within a multitude of interviews surrounding both films will be analyzed. Also highly relevant is the fact that Kidman's use of media discourses to point to the craft of her acting becomes far more prominent.

Chapter Four will focus on the most recent stage in Kidman's career and examine it as her most valued-yet-volatile phase as intertextual performer. Kidman's Oscar-winning performance as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* will be analyzed for its realization

of culturally-valued transformative authenticity, and to what extent its success depends on the harmony of Kidman's on and off-screen 'performances.' (Kidman transforms into a narratively and emotionally-convincing Virginia Woolf, but also validates the 'truth' of her acting with public discussion of how she channelled her own emotional turmoil into her performance as Woolf, her first film role following her divorce.) In contrast, Kidman's portrayals of Faunia Farley in *The Human Stain* (Robert Benton, 2003) and Ada Monroe in *Cold Mountain* (Anthony Minghella, 2003) will be considered for their mixed success in achieving artistic recognition through intertextual performance. The significance of the physical traits a star like Kidman brings to her roles will be especially pertinent to this chapter, as will the antithetical demands of a film industry that elevates the artistic merit of transformative performance, yet relies on the female star as a recognizable, visually-appealing commodity crucial to attracting viewers.

Chapter I

Contemporary Hollywood Stardom, Performance, and the Female Star

The most important fact about stars is that they are performers... Whether superb or mediocre, whether they have wide-ranging or limited skills, they are still performers. To cope with this, a more substantial account of film performance than presently exists is needed. What technical skills are required? How important is physical presence (bodies, faces, voices, movements)? What kind of knowledge and intelligence do performers need? Giving priority to the discussion of performance should help to make the discussion more intellectually secure.¹

In the post-studio context, the virtual private life of the stars cannot be discursively curtailed and comfortably equated with a character-inflected persona. Persona, once hardwired into a transparent public biography, now becomes an uncertain presence, dimly discernible behind a roster of successful characterizations.²

Writing in a recent anthology dealing with the current state of Hollywood stardom, Alan Lovell and Barry King each identify areas in need of further exploration within contemporary star studies. For Lovell, issues of performance, largely neglected by ideological approaches to analyzing stardom, need to be re-examined, and stars re-evaluated as actors with identifiable skills and physiognomic traits that they mobilize within their screen roles. For King, meanwhile, the notion of coherent star personae formation via promotion and publicity must be re-considered in a post-studio, post-globalization industrial context where constant re-invention has replaced consistency as the mandatory approach to image management. Although star performances and personae are each legitimate topics for exploration in their own right, they become especially prescient when considered for their complex and often problematic relationship with one another, an endeavour that both film and drama studies have been

¹ Alan Lovell, "I Went in Search of Deborah Kerr, Jodie Foster, and Julianne Moore But Got Waylaid," in Austin and Barker, *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, 268.

² Barry King, "Embodying an Elastic Self: The Parametrics of Contemporary Stardom," in Austin and Barker, *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, 59.

somewhat reluctant to undertake. While studies of stardom have frequently side-stepped in-depth considerations of acting in analyzing stars, studies of acting have been equally reluctant to fully address the impact of stardom on any given performance.³ This reluctance has been particularly detrimental to studies of female stars since, as Geraghty's study indicates, female stars will rarely (if ever) be analyzed for their on-screen performance skills alone.

This project attempts to redress a certain longstanding imbalance within star studies by providing in-depth analysis of a contemporary female star's film performances, the critical reception of these performances, and the constantly-shifting, media-generated star persona that inevitably inflects both. If a star's screen roles and media interactions can both be viewed as a kind of 'performance,' how are these performances visually and verbally mobilized (both individually, and in relation to one another) in order to maximize a star's continued relevance and 'worth' within an already star-saturated cultural context? How is this mobilization especially relevant to the female star, relegated as she has been to constraining star-celebrity status? Thus, in response to the inevitable question, "Why Nicole Kidman?" I would argue that there are few contemporary female stars who so clearly invite investigation via these intersecting new directions in star studies. The fundamental three-part structure of Kidman's image will be central to this investigation: first, Kidman as celebrity spectacle — glittering fashion

³ Even the excellent studies conducted by Naremore and in the screen acting anthology compiled by Lovell and Kramer, which focus on the acting of prominent contemporary and studio-era stars, tend to downplay the significance of media-generated star image in order to focus on the mechanics of performance, in part, presumably, as a means of defining their work from Richard Dyer's. See James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); *Screen Acting*, eds. Alan Lovell and Peter Kramer, (London: Routledge, 1999).

icon gracing various magazine covers, and ‘best-dressed’ on any given red carpet; second, Kidman as ‘real’ person, or as rather site of self-revelation and confession within media interviews; and third, Kidman-as-site-of-performance — singer, dancer and seductress as courtesan Satine in *Moulin Rouge*, unrecognisable and heartbreaking as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*, rough-edged and sensual as the working-class Faunia in *The Human Stain*, to name a few. The significance of Kidman as site-of-performance becomes increasingly evident when considering the limiting narrative contexts and acting modes that have typically been made available to the female star. However, first it is necessary to consider briefly how this study has evolved out of the existing scholarship on stardom and performance.

Star Studies Past, Present, and Future: Richard Dyer and beyond

In an early twenty-first century context where the shifting imperatives of industry, technology, and culture have re-defined what constitutes a ‘star,’ film studies has been forced to re-evaluate the way stars are constructed, used, valued, and even disposed of within contemporary society. Although it has been called embryonic in its development, star studies has already passed through several distinct phases in its evolution. Prior to Richard Dyer’s influential volumes, *Stars* (first published in 1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), film stars tended to be studied either for the ways in which they functioned to embody and fulfill human/viewer needs,⁴ or from a journalistic perspective whereby their status as historical ‘phenomena’ was examined.⁵ Dyer’s work introduced the practice of studying the multiple, interlocking film and media discourses that surround and construct

⁴ See Orrin Klapp, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962); Edgar Morin, *The Stars* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960).

⁵ See Alexander Walker, *Stardom, the Hollywood Phenomenon* (London: Penguin, 1974).

the star in conflicting, often contradictory ways in order to determine and analyze his/her ideological function within capitalist society. Dyer's approach supplanted vague notions of star 'magic' and 'power' with forceful, legitimating analyses of stars' political significance across a range of film and media discourses. Central to this project was the question of how carefully structured star images may have influenced our way of thinking about personal identity and individuality.

However, although it remained the dominant framework for star studies in the decades that followed, Dyer's model has required updating for the new millennium in several respects:

- 1) As the value of the term 'star' becomes diluted by the interpolation and promotion of highly 'disposable' aspirants from all realms of entertainment (music, television, sports, etc.), so too does the relevance of Dyer's Marxist emphasis on a 'conflict-based' model of stardom whereby certain stars embody — and often reconcile — certain societal contradictions. Star studies now treats the industrial concerns that shape star construction and consumption as equally significant to its underlying ideology. For example, Richard DeCordova's work on early film stardom has been instrumental in bringing a historiographical/economic component to analyzing the polysemy of star images, since echoed in studies of contemporary stardom conducted by Paul McDonald and Thomas Austin, to name a few. From 1909 onwards, DeCordova traces star development from unnamed actors to 'picture personalities' constructed solely from the traits evident in their film performances, to personalities whose private lives were constructed to mirror their on-screen identities and thus give viewers a sense of 'closure,' to multi-layered 'stars' whose identities were deepened

by the uncontrolled revelations of various scandals in the 20s. This notion of a gradual public excavation of star privacy, of peeling back the layers to find the true, 'authentic' person behind the star, of discovering "a set of secrets...beneath a set of secrets,"⁶ remains just as relevant within star studies today, especially given the number of potentially-revealing discourses now circulating around the contemporary star.

- 2) The very 'structure' of Dyer's notion of the "structured polysemy" of star image as "the multiple but finite meanings and affects that a star image signifies"⁷ gets thrown into question by a marked decrease in studio control over the contemporary star image, as well as the sheer multiplicity and diversity of media outlets — ranging from print to television to the Internet — through which the star may generate meaning. I'm not suggesting that contemporary stars can generate infinite meanings, but that the channels circulating star image now border on the infinite, thus making a wider range of potential meaning available to an ever-wider range of viewers/readers/listeners/surfers with ever-increasing rapidity. For example, for the purposes of this study, in addition to substantial library archives of magazine and

⁶ Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 140. As with Method-influenced 'authenticity' in acting, this notion of star 'authenticity' is used herein to refer to a constructed ideal, a desired quality in the star — that he/she possesses a 'true' self or identity underlying the gloss of his/her star image. Such authenticity may be suggested through the 'uncontrolled' revelations of gossip/scandal discourses, or intentionally through the star's seemingly 'genuine' revelations within interviews, and may in turn be interpreted by the public as truthful. Even when such revelations are proven untrue, the public belief in the star's underlying 'truth' makes this quest for authenticity an ongoing one. This is especially true within contemporary media discourse, where what is presented/interpreted as 'authentic' one week may be debunked by something even more authentic the next. See Richard Dyer, "A Star is Born and the Construction of Authenticity," in Gledhill, *Stardom*, 132-139.

⁷ Dyer, *Stars*, 63.

newspaper articles and reviews from the past 15 years,⁸ I have also had access to a wide range of both film-focused and general interest magazines featuring articles about Kidman as they appear on newsstand shelves, typically coinciding with the release of one of the five films she has released in the past 18 months.⁹ Four different dinner-hour entertainment news programs (*Entertainment Tonight*, *Extra*, *Access Hollywood*, and *E Talk Daily*) provide regular Kidman coverage, ranging from her appearances at film premieres and the Oscars to speculation about her weight and love life, while ‘serious’ news magazine programs such as *20/20*, *60 Minutes*, and *Larry King Live* have all featured lengthy interview segments with Kidman. From the Internet, I’ve had access to several ‘entertainment news’ websites,¹⁰ as well as two in-depth fan sites which provided extensive archives of past Kidman articles, many of which are re-typed and submitted by members in order to avoid copyright laws.¹¹ As Paul McDonald points out, such a growing multiplicity of contemporary star discourses doesn’t necessarily function to ‘re-work’ the image of the star in new or revolutionary ways. Typically, the representational strategies employed are in keeping with traditional methods of maximizing the star’s worth-as-commodity.¹²

However, my research has indicated that this acceleration within media representation

⁸ The resources included, but were not limited to *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Time*, *People*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Globe and Mail*.

⁹ These titles included *Vanity Fair*, *Marie Claire*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Vogue*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *W*, *Elle*, and *Premiere*. Due in part to this incredibly full release schedule, no fewer than 22 magazines during this period have featured Kidman on their cover, of which 14 carried in-depth profiles and/or interviews.

¹⁰ See *ET Online* at <http://et.tv.yahoo.com/>, *E! Online* at <http://www.eonline.com/>, and *Hollywood.com* at <http://www.Hollywood.com/>.

¹¹ See *Team Nicole* at <http://www.teamnicole.com/> and *Nicole Online* at <http://www/Nicole-Online.net/>.

¹² Paul McDonald, “Stars in the Online Universe: Promotion, Nudity, Reverence,” in Austin and Barker, *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, 43.

hasn't just functioned to foster a heightened sense of intimacy with the star in question as each new angle or story offers the possibility of revealing the 'truth' behind the image; it has also increased the speed with which the image may undergo significant changes and become re-positioned in relation to new, diverse film roles.

- 3) There is a new, necessary focus on star acting as both a primary source of artistic significance and a valued form of labour that functions to grant the actor autonomy and some degree of power within both contemporary culture and the industrial context of film production. Barry King traces the process by which stars in the post-studio era became proprietors of their own images, moving from the 'real' subsumption of their labour under a studio regime that controlled all facets of their performances and publicity, to the 'formal' subsumption of their labour as self-governing artists during the subsequent rise of independent production and picture-by-picture contracts.¹³ This shift has granted stars greater freedom in choosing their roles, crafting their performances, and putting forth a discernable public star persona at the same time as it has caused them to be held increasingly responsible for their failures. Technical excellence as an actor thus becomes an important means of achieving and maintaining cultural relevance for the contemporary star. Performance-focused studies (see Naremore and Lovell and Kramer, for example) have helped fill an important void by providing close textual analyses of screen acting in terms of its verbal and visual components as well as its technological concerns. Furthermore, the role of interviews in legitimating star labour — directing viewers to the work of the performance, as well as through more subtle intimations that the star

¹³ Barry King, "Stardom as an Occupation," in *The Hollywood Film Industry: A Reader*, ed. Paul Kerr (London: Routledge, 1986), 168-169.

possesses a deep, emotional connection to their character — cannot be overestimated.

As Paul McDonald observes

Discourses of star labour do not simply report the work of film performance but also regulate hierarchies and power relationships between performers determined by judgements of artistic legitimacy. As with any discourse, images of star labour are open to the differentiated readings of socially-situated moviegoers, and beliefs about the work of stars are never separate from beliefs about other types of work and experiences of working.¹⁴

Given this inextricable connection McDonald notes between the work of stars and various concepts of work in general, perhaps it is not altogether surprising that the performed labour of male stars tends to be valued over that of the female star, even within contemporary culture.

Screen performance and the female star: The Method and beyond

One of the common pleasures of moviegoing derives from our feeling that an actor is doing something remarkable.¹⁵

Before turning to a detailed study of Kidman, we must first consider what is at stake for the contemporary female star who attempts to achieve cultural value through her acting. In the brief and tumultuous history of the screen actor, only two criteria for evaluating film acting have remained relatively constant: first, that we expect our finest actors to accomplish something ‘remarkable’ — some discernable physical, vocal, and/or emotional feat that elevates film acting from the realm of popular culture to that of the high cultural standards of theatre; and second, that the gender of the actor in question will inevitably affect our acceptance of any such ‘remarkable’ performance. It is therefore important to establish some historical context for the often-troubled relationship between

¹⁴ Paul McDonald, “Reconceptualising Stardom,” in Dyer, *Stars*, 196.

¹⁵ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 26.

female performers and culturally-dominant modes of acting, and to examine how this dialectic has affected current ways of appreciating the work of female stars.

For better or for worse, contemporary North American conceptions of culturally-valued film acting have become inextricably linked to the perceived emotional authenticity of what Geraghty broadly calls “cinematic method acting.”¹⁶ Popularized during a post-World War II movement towards cinematic realism and its near-obsession with re-defining masculine identity, early versions of the Method (particularly that espoused by Lee Strasberg) offered a historically-specific interpretation of Constantin Stanislavski’s system that may have ultimately placed undue limitations on its female proponents. As Steve Vineberg asserts

American culture has led our actors straight to it... the Method, because of its link with realism, its affirmation of Freud, and its focus on adolescent rebellion as the core of much adult behaviour, is a natural dramatic expression of the way Americans understand and define themselves.¹⁷

Film and theatre scholars alike disagree widely over the extent to which Method acting can be consistently discerned and interpreted within film performances. Theatre semiotician Colin Counsell identifies a series of recognizable verbal and visual signs through which we can ‘read’ Method acting — what he terms an “iconography of neurosis,” conveying the struggle between authentic inner and repressed outer selves.¹⁸ Conversely, Dyer stresses additional knowledge of the actor’s technique on the part of the spectator, asserting that “the formal differences between the Method and, say, the Broadway/repertory style are less clear than the known differences between how the

¹⁶ Geraghty, “Re-examining Stardom,” 192-196.

¹⁷ Steve Vineberg, *Method Actors: Three Generations of an American Acting Style* (New York and Toronto: Schirmer Books-Macmillan, 1991), xiii.

¹⁸ Colin Counsell, *Signs of Performance: an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1996), 69-70.

performances were arrived at.”¹⁹ For the purposes of this study, both Kidman’s on-screen behaviour and, where applicable, her off-screen discussion of the techniques and emotions informing that behaviour will be considered, as both function to validate and highlight her work-as-actor. However, although questions of ‘authenticity,’ ‘interiority,’ and ‘self-revelation’ and their perceptible presence/absence on screen and off are central to this project, they are also dealt with herein primarily as constructs of Method acting mythology and rhetoric, the desired ideals of ‘true’ performance whose existence can never be guaranteed or proven, just performed and interpreted as such.

It is worth noting briefly that the original Stanislavski system — developed by Moscow Art Theatre director Constantin Stanislavski in hopes of bringing greater realism to late 19th and early 20th century stage — appears to have been equally accessible to male and female performers, provided that the given performance realistically served the dramatic context of the narrative.²⁰ Stanislavski espoused the creation of a believable character from what has been termed the “inside-out” rather than the “outside-in;” the Stanislavskian actor strove to immerse himself in the role so fully that he actually experienced the authentic emotions of the character and thus gave an exceedingly natural performance true to the real, human demands of the role.²¹ While empathy with one’s character was needed, Stanislavski’s emphasis on ‘living the part’ referred primarily to the emotional and physical work invested in becoming the character.

¹⁹ Dyer, *Stars*, 136.

²⁰ The first Stanislavskian performer to achieve North American notoriety was female. Alla Nazimova’s English-speaking stage debut in *The Chosen People* during a 1905 tour of the United States was hailed for its naturalism and virtuosity. Richard Blum, *American Film Acting: The Stanislavski Heritage* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research, 1984), 21.

²¹ Elly A. Konijn, *Acting Emotions* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000), 36-39.

It appears that this lauded performance mode only became truly problematic for female performers around the time that, as Vineberg puts it, American culture was leading actors straight to it — a postwar era characterized by both its fascination with Freudian psychoanalysis and a certain paranoia over shifting gender roles.²² Lee Strasberg's highly psychoanalytic adaptation of Stanislavski's system — re-named 'the Method' during Strasberg's associations with The Group Theatre in the 30's and The Actor's Studio in the late 40s and 50s — prioritized emotional truth created through a kind of public psychoanalysis of its actors. Simply put, for Strasberg, acting from the "inside-out" and "living the part" entailed a kind of psychic substitution of real actor for fictional character. Through exercises such as 'affective memory,' the actor ensured an authentically emotive performance by enacting feelings drawn directly from the very specific realm of his/her own reservoir of past experiences, memories, and feelings.²³ As Dyer points out, the belief "that the Method performer 'got inside the character' or 'became' him/her gave such performances a mark of authenticity that made other styles seem correspondingly artificial or stilted."²⁴ Conversely, as Cynthia Baron notes, the theatrical methods employed by the most acclaimed studio-era actors emphasized the actor's mastery of their role via an emotional distance from the character being played, a

²² Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 86-91. Psychiatry — and Freudian psychoanalysis in particular — was responsible for revolutionizing the way the 'self' was viewed in North American society, and entailed a widespread shift towards notions of internality and the 'inner self.' Psychoanalysis achieved widespread acceptance in America — not to mention its implicit bias towards explorations of male identity — when an exceedingly high number of "psychically damaged young men" required treatment upon their return from World War II, and an influx of European psychoanalysts fleeing Hitler were available to treat them.

²³ For detailed accounts of Strasberg's adaptation of Stanislavski, see Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, 52-78; Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 85-113; Blum, *American Film Acting*, 51-58.

²⁴ Dyer, *Stars*, 142.

distance that was “precisely what proponents of Method acting in the 1950s would reject, for they saw that ‘ability’ as the source of inauthentic performance.”²⁵ The perceived authenticity of the Method was articulated through the naturalism of the fragmented speech, frustrated gestures, and heightened emotionality that constituted the ‘iconography of neurosis’ of the early Method actor, whose work was soon viewed as artistically superior to the comparatively stagy, ‘external’ work of most studio-era Hollywood actors.

This shift towards Method-influenced acting also allowed the male star to usurp the centrality of the female star within increasingly-realist Hollywood narratives, granting him access to the feminine realm of pathos and tears; Naremore notes that “this stress on inwardness sometimes resulted in a shrill, almost hysteric quality... centring on male rather than female stars.”²⁶ Although Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951) and *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954), Montgomery Clift in *A Place in the Sun* (George Stevens, 1951) and James Dean in *East of Eden* (Elia Kazan, 1955) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) all demonstrate, at various points, a conventionally ‘feminine’ emotionality, such histrionics are naturalized through their use of these new and uniquely ‘male’ signs of inarticulate speech, brooding silence, and frustrated gestures to convey feeling. It has therefore been argued that these actors enacted the emotional struggle of the post-war American male trying to reassert himself in a society where codes of masculinity were shifting and uncertain, and the desire for youthful rebellion against the untrustworthy culture that had damaged him in the first

²⁵ Cynthia Baron, “Crafting Film Performances: Acting in the Hollywood Studio Era,” in Lovell and Kramer, *Screen Acting*, 43.

²⁶ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 203.

place.²⁷ This new breed of male hero tended to eschew the trappings of stardom, instead authenticating his acting by focusing public attention on a combination of the intensive research he invested in the role, and perhaps more importantly, the off-screen rebelliousness and volatility that underscored his performance — Dean, for example, became a cultural icon for his perceived ability to channel his own tortured psyche into that of his character.²⁸

It is a telling observation that even the most successful of the early female Method performers — such as Eva Marie Saint, Shelley Winters, and Joanne Woodward — never achieved comparable cultural iconicity to their male counterparts.²⁹ After all, these women were not typically placed in the kind of ‘young rebel’ roles that made their male counterparts’ gesticulations and inarticulateness so fitting, nor were they encouraged to participate in similar types of off-screen rebellion. Thanks to an emerging cinematic emphasis on realism, they were typically cast as the conventional female ‘helpmeet’ figure — a civilizing agent of narrative advancement who, as Virginia Wright Wexman asserts, “ministered to the internal conflicts of a neurotic male who was unsure of his masculine identity,” her obligation to the “the drama of male personality” leaving her precious little time to explore her own feminine identity.³⁰ Sue-Ellen Case observes a similarly constraining gender divide in realist theatre, whereby female characters confined by Freudian principles and domestic spaces become defeatist and dependent, the

²⁷ See Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, 68 and Leigh Woods, “The Method Revisited and Matters of Style,” *Playing to the Camera*, eds. Bert Cardullo et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 263.

²⁸ See, for example, Shelley Frome, “The Case of James Dean,” *The Actor’s Studio: A History* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2000), 108-120.

²⁹ Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, 75.

³⁰ Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 170.

sexual ‘Other’ to a male sexual subject, and ultimately, “occupants of a ‘prisonhouse of art’ for women, both in their representation... and in the female actor’s preparation and production of such roles.”³¹

We needn’t look far to find examples of the early Method actress trapped in a cinematic ‘prisonhouse’ of narrative marginality: Shelley Winters’ thankless performance as Alice, the mousy factory worker impregnated and abandoned by Montgomery Clift’s brooding social climber in *A Place in the Sun*, Eva Marie Saint’s angelic Edie to Brando’s tormented Terry in *On the Waterfront*, and Sandy Dennis’ shrill professor’s wife in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Mike Nichols, 1966) all come to mind.³² All three received Academy Awards or nominations for their performances; however, their roles are essentially supporting ones that, especially in the case of Winters and Saint, tend to minimize the recognizable signs of Method acting while functioning to facilitate the uniquely masculine ‘art’ of their central male, Method-trained co-star.

Counsell asserts that

The iconography of neurosis quickly became an acceptable way of representing men because extreme individuality is traditionally a male preserve. The range of acceptable images of women has always been narrower and stricter, in tandem with the conventions of female beauty. Indeed, the neurotic woman was so demonised a figure that she could appear only as victim or villainess, effectively banning the majority of Studio actresses from most leading roles in mainstream Hollywood cinema; the Method actress could not be ‘normal’ enough.³³

Indeed, Method actresses such as Geraldine Page, Kim Stanley, and Sandy Dennis — who overtly utilized the same tics, mannerisms, and approaches to emotional self-revelation praised in Brando, Dean, *et. al* — could not be normal enough, and tended to

³¹ Sue Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 124.

³² All three women studied at The Actor’s Studio during Strasberg’s tenure.

³³ Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, 76.

be criticized as excessively mannered, neurotic and hysterical.³⁴ The underlying belief that Method actors essentially channelled their inner selves into the creation of character also seemed to create a problematic link between ‘real’ and ‘performed’ female neuroses, a connection only exacerbated by public fascination with the ‘real life’ fragility of certain Method-influenced actresses. Kim Stanley’s retirement from acting was widely reported after she suffered a breakdown, while famed Group Theatre alumnus Frances Farmer’s multiple institutionalizations and subsequent lobotomy became fodder for Hollywood tabloids, biographies, and eventually, an overwrought film biopic starring Jessica Lange.³⁵

Perhaps most problematic was Marilyn Monroe’s apparent suicide not long after her Method-derived performance in *The Misfits* (John Huston, 1961), coached extensively by Lee Strasberg and his wife, Paula. While James Dean’s troubled past and emotional instability functioned to legitimate the ‘truth’ and quality of his acting, Monroe’s known fragility seemed only to further undermine her bid at cultural respectability. The proximity of Monroe’s death to her last completed screen performance — not to mention Arthur Miller’s inclusion of many widely-known personal details from Monroe’s life in the film’s screenplay — has prompted *The Misfits* to be read primarily in terms of tragic autobiography, not skill or mastery of technique, even

³⁴ Steve Vineberg goes so far as to devote an entire chapter to Geraldine Page, Kim Stanley, and Sandy Dennis entitled “The Neurosis Kids,” and while he doesn’t explicitly link the ‘difficulty’ of these performances to gender, Vineberg essentially vilifies the trio of female performers for the same techniques that he praised in Brando, Clift, and Dean in previous chapters. The abundance of words and phrases like “crazy bitch,” “madwoman,” “hysterical,” “crazies,” and “loony” used in analyzing the stage and screen performances of each reveal a none-too-subtle gender bias. See Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 206-222.

³⁵ The film was entitled *Frances* (Graeme Clifford, 1982), and, oddly enough, co-starred Kim Stanley.

within contemporary scholarship. As Vineberg puts it, “There was a perilous excitement in the spectacle of an actress who seemed constantly about to break down. An unmatched honesty, too: After all, this wasn’t acting, it was the real stuff.”³⁶

One of the most acclaimed female Method performances of the era was Joanne Woodward’s rather controlled and workmanlike turn as a housewife with multiple personality disorder in *The Three Faces of Eve* (Nunnally Johnson, 1957), which earned Woodward an Oscar. Any and all troubling Method-derived tics (and there really aren’t many, as Woodward has a certain smoothness about her even when swinging from ‘personality’ to ‘personality’) are naturalized by Eve’s acknowledged madness within the narrative, which even culminates in the sweetest and blindest of Eve’s personas ‘triumphing’ in the struggle for control of her consciousness. Method-madwoman transformed into *tabula rasa* — it was the Freudian feel-good story of the decade. The film’s outcome thus reinforces Dyer’s suggestion that the Method may be prone to “a sexist bias whereby disturbance and anguish were reserved for men and repression for women—men as the Id, women as its repression.”³⁷

Given this inequity within such an influential mode of performance, how, then, can the contemporary female star aspire to ‘star performer’ status without being marginalized or demonised in a similar fashion to her predecessors? Certainly a relaxation of gender-coded representational strategies in the intervening decades have allowed female actors greater access to Method acting techniques. Naremore cites the work of Jane Fonda, Faye Dunaway and Diane Keaton in the 70s as evidence that “a re-emergent feminism and a relaxation of censorship had enabled women (who were always

³⁶ Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 210.

³⁷ Dyer, *Stars*, 142.

allowed tears) to use the same hesitant, potentially rebellious, neurotically intense expressiveness as the Method males.”³⁸

Of course, this growing acceptance of the female Method actor didn't wholly erase the oppressive structures she often found herself placed in. Fonda's performance in *Klute* (Alan Pakula, 1972) represents one of the most acclaimed pieces of female Method acting in film history, made even more remarkable by the fact that an established star like Fonda was playing such a frankly sexual and 'realistic' character.³⁹ But lest we forget, Fonda's Bree Daniel is still a prostitute, placed in a subservient relationship by the film's title (and title character), whose overt displays of 'neuroses' are typically isolated within the realm of her discussions with her analyst. Furthermore, as Counsell points out, Fonda's use of Method iconography in her most acclaimed roles tends to imply an underlying inner self that is “fragile and needy... suggest(ing) the kind of vulnerability which is ascribed to women, an **insecure, emotional centre** masked by a façade of severity.”⁴⁰

Perhaps most significantly for the contemporary female star, 'realistic' contemporary acting has since loosened the strict, psychoanalytic dictates of early Method acting to embrace what Naremore terms a more 'approximately Stanislavskian' approach that prioritizes the needs of the text and the character over the pure psychological probing and revelation of the 'real' actor.⁴¹ While still remarkably central

³⁸ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 203.

³⁹ Fonda's 'sex kitten' romps in such films as *La Ronde* and *Barbarella* occupied the earlier, Bardot-like ingénue phase of her career, and were a far cry from the gritty realist context of *Klute*. See Tessa Perkins, "The Politics of 'Jane Fonda,'" in Gledhill, *Stardom*, 241-246.

⁴⁰ Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, 76. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 2.

to any discussions of cultural value and film acting, “the American Method has come to be considered a style like others, contingent not so much on a timeless and universal notion of human nature as on historically and culturally determined factors.”⁴²

Current variations on the Method use Strasberg’s techniques selectively, with the one-to-one correspondence between actor and character most frequently left behind. Barry King differentiates between the high artistic esteem now placed on ‘impersonation,’ which foregrounds the actor’s transformations into different roles and consequent seamless integration into the narrative, and the lesser merits of ‘personification,’ in which the actor essentially plays themselves across a series of roles.⁴³ This has been a common criticism of postwar Method acting following its heyday — that in basing their performances on such deeply personal affective memories, early Method actors always played a version of themselves, a fact that threatened to unsettle fictional coherence by pointing to the ‘real’ identity of the star. Some degree of separation between star and role has since become crucial to public perceptions of craftsmanship in acting. Therefore, although traditionally star acting has also been understood in terms of personification and typecasting, allowing the star to construct a coherent — and marketable — star image across a series of films, many contemporary stars now accrue the highest form of cultural capital by contrasting roles that mobilize recognisable facets of their image with those roles which allow them to play against type and ‘disappear’ into character.⁴⁴

⁴² Woods et. al, *Playing to the Camera*, 263.

⁴³ King, “Articulating Stardom,” 167-182.

⁴⁴ Paul McDonald, “Film Acting,” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30-35.

The impersonatory accomplishments of such chameleonic latter-day Method disciples as Robert DeNiro and Dustin Hoffman in the 70s and 80s set a new precedent for aspirant star-performers.⁴⁵ Presenting themselves as even more disdainful of celebrity stardom than their postwar predecessors, these actors tended to deflect media interest in their personal lives onto the recognisable ‘work’ they invested in their film roles, disclosing how they prepared for weeks or months in advance to achieve the physical, vocal, *and* emotional reality of their character. Such transformative work has since become as much a marker of performance ‘value’ as the psychological depth and intensity conveyed through a Method-derived iconography of neurosis. (DeNiro’s obsessive ‘body sculpting’ to fit character, be it through weight gain or body building, is now by no means an isolated approach — see, for example, the transformative accomplishments of recent Oscar winners Russell Crowe, Adrian Brody, and Sean Penn.)⁴⁶ The Stanislavskian emphasis on narratively-believable characterization thus fuses with a certain Strasbergian emphasis on the actor’s own emotional truth to create “the belief that good acting is ‘true to life’ and at the same time expressive of the actor’s authentic, ‘organic’ self.”⁴⁷ In other words, culturally-valued acting now entails a simultaneous transformation and realization of the self. It is both ‘true to life’—

⁴⁵ DeNiro studied extensively with Group Theatre co-founder Stella Adler, who, unlike her contemporary and rival Strasberg, emphasized a Stanislavskian faithfulness to character and text. Adler derided affective memory for its tendency to “induce hysteria” rather than believable acting. Vineberg, *Method Actors*, 108.

⁴⁶ Crowe was nominated for a Best Actor Oscar three years in a row for roles that demanded his complete transformation from film to film — *The Insider* (1999), *Gladiator* (2000), and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), respectively. Brody lost 30 pounds, learned Polish, and became a skilled piano player for his role in *The Pianist* (2002). Penn’s two most recent roles — as a vengeful ex-con in *Mystic River* (2003) and a math professor and heart transplant patient in *21 Grams* (2003) — earned him multiple awards and nominations, including the Best Actor Oscar for *Mystic River*.

⁴⁷ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 2.

demanding that the actor ‘transform’ into a believable character — and ‘true to self,’ demanding the perceptible expression of the artist’s inner essence, albeit not in such a direct way as Strasberg espoused. This performance mode will be heretofore identified, for the sake of brevity and clarity, as ‘transformative authenticity.’

Again, this shift has had distinct consequences for the female actor, and the female star in particular. Visible transformations of a contemporary female star’s appearance to suit the physical reality of character have frequently met with mixed responses. Certainly critics and viewers alike were eager to forget Julia Roberts’ first and last attempt to disguise her star glamour as a dowdy Gothic maid in *Mary Reilly* (Stephen Frears, 1996),⁴⁸ just as they were Sharon Stone’s grim portrayal of a death row inmate in *Last Dance* (Bruce Beresford, 1996.) While praised for her performance in *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, Renee Zellweger was subjected to endless media scrutiny regarding how she gained weight for the role, how it affected her self-esteem, and whether her rail-thin frame after shedding the excess pounds was the sign of an eating disorder — in short, the kind of interrogation rarely faced by Crowe or DeNiro when they bulk up or trim down for a role.⁴⁹

As instantly recognisable female stars, all three women have become at least somewhat defined by the glamour-fetishized iconography of celebrity media, and are thus

⁴⁸ Opined one unimpressed critic: “A whole Julia Roberts movie without a hint of her famously pretty Julia Roberts smile may be more than even her most devoted fans can bear.” Peter Stack, “Hyde-bound Roberts: Perky star trapped in glum ‘Reilly’ role,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 February 1996, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1996/02/23/DD28207.DTL>.

⁴⁹ See “Renee Refuses To Gain Weight for ‘Bridget Jones’ Sequel,” *The Internet Movie Database*, 8 October 2002, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243155/news>.

expected to look consumable, on-screen and off.⁵⁰ The ‘work’ of star glamour becomes foregrounded through the contrast between the ‘real’ star and her ‘deglamourized’ role. When stars claim that they just stopped wearing makeup to appear suitably plain for a certain character, or that they simply ate fatty food and gave up exercise for several months to gain weight for a role, they point readers/viewers to the very fact of the intensive regimens (be it make-up, hair, restrictive diet, constant exercise) they must maintain to perform upkeep on their appearance. As Counsell points out, ‘appropriate’ female behaviour and ‘suitable’ feminine appearance are closely linked, as are widely-held perceptions of moral goodness and physical attractiveness; thus, perhaps it is not surprising that even the most acclaimed female stars tend to be limited as to the number of transformative roles they can assume over the course of their careers.⁵¹

Media Performance and the female star: Managing an elastic persona

This ‘true to self’ component of culturally-valued acting has also had distinct implications for the female star. As closer scrutiny of Kidman will show, there remains a certain need to adopt a confessional tone regarding one’s personal life in the media, and use such ‘real-life’ self-revelation to validate similarly self-revelatory screen performances. Such soul-baring media performances tend to function analogously to the scandal discourses DeCordova notes in the 20s, deepening the female star’s persona by

⁵⁰ This expectation finds its most recent incarnation through a proliferation of magazine features that fixate on slippages between stars’ public glamour images and private, ‘real’ appearances. Such features may show contrasting pictures of certain stars ‘with’ makeup and without, or speculate via close-ups of certain body parts/facial areas as to whether the star in question has had plastic surgery. See, for example, Joey Bartomomeo, “Hollywood’s Botox Obsession,” *US Weekly*, 8 March 2004, 44-49.

⁵¹ The recent career trajectories of Oscar-winners Hilary Swank, Julia Roberts, and Halle Berry (all of whom won awards for gritty, transformative performances) seems to confirm this assertion. All three have been confined to either middling romantic comedies, mindless blockbusters, or purely ornamental roles since their awards.

giving the impression of peeling back the layers to reveal secrets hidden behind other secrets — the difference being, of course, that the star being interviewed is ostensibly in control of any revelations made. This is not to suggest that the female star can wholly ‘author’ her own image on screen and off, but rather that the interview provides a forum in which personal revelations may be mobilized in order to enhance audience acceptance of the star in a greater diversity of roles. In this sense, celebrity media discourses, most typically a source of passive objectification, become a forum for ‘active’ performance.

As King asserts

The melding of on-screen performance and off-screen publicity — both kinds of performance — imparts an existential portability to a fictional character which is wrapped around the being in public of the star. It would be too crude to say that the star just plays her persona in every role; rather, the persona is differentially activated in successive roles with the supposed qualities of the star inserted into a character.⁵²

Certainly King is not the first critic to identify the complex interplay of meaning that has always occurred between film stars, their media performances, and the roles they play. Edgar Morin, writing in the twilight years of the studio system, presupposes a desired consistency between star persona and role throughout the star’s career, a consistency predicated on a studio-era tendency to market stars as essentially ‘playing themselves’ across a series of films. The star in question would ‘infect’ her characters with traits that, for the most part, had been carefully constructed by the studio publicity department, and in turn those on-screen character traits would reflect back favourably upon the star.⁵³

King’s perspective, however, re-fashions this star/role dialectic as an occupational response to the new demands and production conditions of contemporary Hollywood. As

⁵² King, “Elastic Self,” 47.

⁵³ Morin, *The Stars*, 37.

King argues in the quote that opens this chapter, the notion of the ‘star persona’ as a coherent, stable combination of screen image and public image no longer applies in the post-studio era wherein stars operate as proprietors of both. For the purposes of this study, ‘persona’ can now be more productively understood as the media-circulated ‘identity’ stars like Kidman carve out of the myriad celebrity discourses that surround their performances — an identity that is just as much a ‘role’ as those performed on screen, and just as fluid. Persona thus at once stands apart from screen image, but can also be mobilized in support of it and vice versa.⁵⁴ As close analysis of Kidman’s career will demonstrate, female star viability is now most readily maintained through both intertextuality — the mobilization of performance and persona in relation to one another — and changeability — a diversity of screen roles and a concomitant ‘re-writing’ of the star’s persona in relation to each new role assumed.⁵⁵

This is no small feat, since star-actors by the very fact of their work as professional ‘pretenders’ raise questions of authenticity, and their film performances, interviews and public appearances tend to be sifted through and re-examined in the hopes of finding the underlying ‘truth’ of the star and measuring it against what the star claims to be. Thus, stars who constantly re-negotiate the terms of their claims to selfhood risk being dismissed as insincere. King argues, however, that the star’s constant renegotiation of the terms of his or her representation — constantly searching for an identity that is at once ‘genuine’ and marketable — appeals to the contemporary reader/viewer’s own sense of alienation from the collective processes of identity formation, ultimately

⁵⁴ Stars less skilled at persona management — as Kidman was at the outset of her career — allow screen characterizations to have an excessive and often negative impact on persona.

⁵⁵ King, “Elastic Self,” 45.

allowing them to find comfort and consolation in the fact that “stars have identity problems too.”⁵⁶

According to the demands of transformative authenticity, the ‘real’ star must at once use media discourses to stress the distance between self and role (thus demonstrating ‘acting ability’ and mastery of craft), while acknowledging or even demonstrating through mediated public behaviour how the character is a ‘natural’ externalization of their own interiority. As they move from role to role, stars must now take responsibility for managing what King terms an “elastic persona,” which entails “a process of constant re-writing in order to accommodate the fact that past and present persona all occupy a common discursive space.”⁵⁷ In the special case of the female star, the most successful intertextual performers put forth a convincing ‘personal’ narrative that negotiates the gap between past and present personas, as well as past and present screen roles, ultimately giving viewers the impression of a gifted performer and emotionally-‘authentic/real’ human being who just happens to be a star.

For the female star who attempts culturally-valued acting without managing this relationship between media and screen performances, even the most skilled attempts at transformative authenticity run the risk of being dismissed as mere ‘mimicry.’ Meryl Streep provides the most famous example, having been largely excluded from the lofty ranks of ‘true’ star-performer because, despite her facility with accents and changes in appearance, “Streep’s acting was understood less as the external expression of internal conflict and more as a matter of role play.”⁵⁸ In comparison to the near-obsessive

⁵⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁸ Geraghty, “Re-examining Stardom,” 199.

character immersion of a DeNiro or a Daniel Day-Lewis (actors both widely known for living ‘in character’ in the weeks or months in and around a film shoot), the ease with which Streep separated herself from her work was widely viewed as invalidating the ‘truth’ of her performance: “I’m very good at stepping out of the character at the end of the day,” Streep has said. “I think I’d die if I didn’t with some of the work I’ve done.”⁵⁹ Hence, despite the incredible virtuosity demonstrated in her transformation from an emotionally and physically-ravaged Polish concentration camp survivor in *Sophie’s Choice* (Alan Pakula, 1982) to a feisty, middle-American union rep in *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1983) just a year later, Streep’s work as an actor remains somewhat undervalued for its perceived lack of “a rhetoric of sincerity or authenticity, two qualities greatly prized in stars because they guarantee... that the star really means what he or she says, and that the star is really what he or she appears to be.”⁶⁰

Charlize Theron’s Oscar-winning performance as serial killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003) provides a timely example of how crucial an ‘elastic persona’ can be for the female star who strives for cultural significance. The initial press surrounding *Monster* struggled to reconcile the stunning former model Theron with her vengeful, white-trash character — primarily through a myopic focus on cataloguing the externalities of the performance, including the false teeth, an acne-splotched make-up job, and especially the 30 pounds Theron had gained so as to better embody Wuornos.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Brian Bates, *The Way of the Actor* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), 73. Streep’s minimal participation in celebrity media discourse — the arena in which the connection between star and character tends to be avidly discussed — may have further undermined the perceived authenticity of Streep’s performances.

⁶⁰ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 11.

⁶¹ See “Charlize’s Monster Transformation,” *ET Online*, 10 December 2003, <http://et.tv.yahoo.com/movies/2003/12/10/charlizetheronmonsterintv/>.

However, this reconciliation was greatly aided by Theron's revelation to Diane Sawyer that she, as a child, had witnessed her own mother shoot and kill her abusive, alcoholic father in self-defence.⁶² Theron's connection to her character was now validated as an emotional one rather than the product of mere, 'outside-in' mimicry, her Stansislawsian personalization of the text not hard to imagine in a narrative that depicts Wuornos' killing spree as the terrifying by-product of the abuse she has experienced as a prostitute. (Significantly, Wuornos' first murder is committed in self-defence.) Her glitzy celebrity identity 're-written' by a persona-deepening revelation, Theron becomes a woman capable of portraying someone like Wuornos. Not only was Theron rewarded with an Oscar for *Monster*, but her performance was so lavishly praised that one critic went so far as to deem it "one of the finest performances in the history of the cinema."⁶³

As this chapter has shown, the road to such lofty cultural recognition is not an easy one for the female star, whose attempts to move beyond mere celebrity spectacle to perform as active creator of meaning have frequently been met with indifference or antipathy. The demands of transformative authenticity — a complex combination of emotional self-revelation and physical/vocal transformation — challenge the notion of female star stasis, passivity, and consumable glamour to such an extent that some degree of extra-filmic negotiation may still be needed. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Nicole Kidman provides an exemplary model of how the contemporary female star may function — both successfully, and unsuccessfully — as intertextual performer.

⁶² This revelation would be repeated in much of the media attention that followed, especially in those articles/interviews that touted Theron's role as a sure-fire Oscar contender.

⁶³ Roger Ebert, "Monster," *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 9 January 2004, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/2004/01/010904.html.

Chapter II

The Ice Maiden Cometh: Persona, Performance, and the Early Hollywood Career of Nicole Kidman

*Stars are endowed with an agency (often celebrated in star discourses) that entails both the living of an extra-filmic 'private life' (always liable to partial revelation and re-writing via the operations of journalism, biography, promotion, and gossip); the deployment of performance techniques and decisions; and a series of lived experiences, contingencies and outcomes which are understood and narrativized as a 'career.'*¹

Nicole Kidman provides a compelling 'career narrative' through which we may trace how the contemporary female star can function as an intertextual performer, balancing distinctive screen roles and an 'elastic' persona in the hopes of achieving lasting cultural worth. If, as Thomas Austin asserts, contemporary stars are now understood via our 'narrativization' of their careers as character-driven continuing stories of professional and personal experience, Kidman represents an exemplary case study. Indeed, the very decision to organize this study diachronically grew out of the belief that a detailed understanding of Kidman's image relies heavily on certain causal links between the personal and the professional that can be made only when her career is examined as a chronological narrative.² While there have been more plot twists and turns over the 18-month course of this study than could have been anticipated, this inherent volatility of contemporary female star images — both in terms of the images themselves, and the relative 'success' or 'failure' of their reception — is precisely what makes someone like Kidman such a fascinating topic of study.

¹ Thomas Austin, "Star Systems," in Austin and Barker, *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, 27.

² This need for narrative chronology is perhaps understandable given the heightened emphasis on the progression of relationships, family, and 'private' life that tends to define media interest in the female star. However, in the case of Kidman, the crucial, 'personal' organizing principle of her star narrative — that of her divorce from Cruise — is also integral to her professional success-as-performer.

This thesis will now examine the complex intersections between Nicole Kidman's screen performances and the acting techniques deployed therein, her media-established star persona (as both 'performed' within interviews and 'revealed' through gossip/speculation, etc.), and the critical responses to both. These intersections will in turn demonstrate the shifting nature of Kidman's star image over the past 15 years, and how its differential incarnations have yielded varying degrees of cultural value. Although Kidman's early career seems marked by the failure of the 'real' star to negotiate the correct balance of distance from and proximity to her most challenging roles, Kidman's highly-publicized negotiation of the chasm between early and recent personas seems to have embodied the type of 'struggle for identity' that functions to comfort readers/viewers.

This chapter focuses upon the opening chapter of Nicole Kidman's career as a Hollywood star. It begins with her transition from Australian star to aspiring Hollywood ingénue thanks to the North American release of *Dead Calm*, and then examines her subsequent films of the 90s, with a particular focus on *To Die For* and *The Portrait of a Lady*. These latter two film performances will be evaluated for visible and audible signs of culturally-valued screen acting. However, such analysis would be incomplete without considering how the ambitious scheming of Suzanne Maretto-Stone in *To Die For* and the icy aloofness of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* may have intersected too closely with Kidman's 'extra-filmic' public/private life, thus undermining her early attempts at transformative authenticity. The impact of Kidman's physical presence and appearance on her early film work will be considered, and will be central to considerations of *Eyes Wide Shut* and *The Blue Room*. This chapter, then, focuses on the

“first draft” of Kidman’s Hollywood star image, prior to its substantial revisions following her divorce.

***Dead Calm* Before the Media Storm**

Nicole Kidman has all the makings of the star—the looks, the temperament, and first and foremost, the acting ability.³

It was very much developed that I wasn’t going to be the damsel in distress here. She grows and finds her inner strength through the course of her ordeal.⁴

Before Nicole Kidman achieved celebrity notoriety as “Mrs. Tom Cruise,” there was a brief period following the international release of the Australian high-seas thriller *Dead Calm* wherein North American film audiences and critics could focus primarily on acting ability as the shaping force of Kidman’s fledgling star image. Although already a star in her native Australia by the age of 18 for her film and television work,⁵ *Dead Calm* has been almost universally recognized as the performance that made Hollywood stardom accessible to Nicole Kidman.

Upon the film’s release, Kidman’s portrayal of Rae Ingram — a woman fighting viciously for her life against the psychotic interloper who has hijacked her yacht (Billy Zane) — was hailed critically for its ‘intensity,’ ‘conviction,’ ‘tenacity,’ and ‘energy.’⁶

³ John O’Donnell, “Flaming Star,” *Rolling Stone*, Australian edition, June 1989, reprinted on *Team Nicole*, <http://www.teamnicole.com/library/viewarticle.php?id=57>.

⁴ Kidman in Bob Strauss, “Glutton for Punishment and Fame,” *Toronto Star*, 13 April 1989, C1. All Canadian newspaper articles cited in this chapter were found through Proquest Canadian Newsstand, http://www.library.carleton.ca/eresources/db_descriptions_1.html#cdnnewsstand.

⁵ Most notable was Kidman’s performance in the television mini-series *Vietnam*, in which her character, Megan Goddard, matures from an awkward 14-year-old into a defiant 24-year-old anti-war protester.

⁶ Rick Groen, “A hypnotic tale of horror at sea,” *The Globe and Mail*, 7 April 1989, C1, <http://proxy.library.carleton.ca:17439/Default.asp>; “Dead Calm,” *Variety*, 1 January 1989, <http://www.variety.com/>.

Critics consistently praised the strength and resilience Kidman's Rae shows in defending herself across a series of chilling action sequences. However, Kidman's believability in the role hinges largely on her ability to first establish Rae's vulnerability and emotional complexity as a mother who has just lost her infant son in a car accident — and who indeed may at first question whether her own life is even worth fighting for. Thus, part of the performance-centred discourse surrounding Kidman at the time of *Dead Calm*'s release focused on the ability of the then-19-year-old actor to lend suitable gravity and maturity to the role.

In interviews, both Kidman and director Phillip Noyce highlighted Kidman's commitment to character, gaining weight in order to appear both physically strong and yet convincingly maternal, doing vocal work to lower the register of her speaking voice, and interviewing Navy wives and women who had lost children in order to better grasp Rae's psychological state. Although Kidman, at such a young age, lacked the personal life experience to authenticate her connection to her character, her immersive research is presented as sufficient to forge an emotionally legitimate connection to Rae:

I somehow had to find maternal feelings. I concentrated very much on trying to imagine what it would be like to lose a son. And I succeeded. I woke up from a dream, about a week before we started shooting, believing... that I had my own little boy in bed with me. When I had experienced that amazing maternal feeling I could then work on imagining losing that.⁷

The film's gruelling action sequences further highlighted Kidman's efforts at authentic performance, as she became a skilled sailor for the role and insisted upon doing her own stunts. While on a North American publicity tour for the film, Kidman boasted

⁷ Kidman in O'Donnell, "Flaming Star."

I've never been so bruised in my life, but I was quite proud to be able to pull off my jeans when I was wearing shorts and hear people say, "I've never seen a bruise like that before."⁸

This revelation thus maps the 'work' of Kidman's acting upon her body, each bruise a badge of her commitment to character, delineating her body as site of performance rather than spectacle.⁹ Whether or not viewers were privy to this extra-filmic information, Kidman's acting in *Dead Calm* bears certain discernable physical and emotional markers of transformative authenticity. While not as prevalent as in later films such as *The Others*, *The Hours*, and *The Human Stain*, I highlight these performance signs not only to begin tracing Kidman's 'narrative-as-performer' across a series of films, but also to indicate how the beginnings of her Hollywood star image took shape.

As the grieving wife of a 40-something naval officer (Sam Neill), Kidman's Rae effectively combines the vocal and physical presence of a woman in her mid-to-late-twenties with an occasionally-glimpsed, age-transcendent kind of emotional devastation. Two early scenes in particular establish Rae as a woman who convincingly masks, but cannot wholly erase, the depth of her grief. The first occurs when Rae wakes with a guttural, anguished cry from a horrifying dreamed flashback to her son's death. Through choked sobs, she admits to her husband that she had relived the trauma with such force that "I could smell his hair." At John's coaxing, Rae eventually manages to control her tears and promise him she will try to heal, but her remaining anxieties are revealed by a prolonged though almost imperceptible struggle to regain control of her breathing. The second is a quieter moment when Rae takes a swim off the deck of the *Saracen* while

⁸ Kidman in Strauss, "Glutton."

⁹ According to Geraghty, this notion of the body as 'site of performance' is a key attribute of the (typically male) star performer. Geraghty, "Re-examining stardom," 193-194.

John looks on adoringly. Sensing his expectant gaze, Rae's pensive, distant expression suddenly morphs into a smile; she 'performs' the bliss she used to experience while swimming in the ocean in order to convince John that their vacation has helped ease her pain. In both cases, Kidman succeeds at what Naremore calls "expressive incoherence," whereby her skill as an actor is showcased through Rae's carefully-modulated conflict between her 'public' and 'private' identities and their related expressions, or what Method scholars would call a battle between repressed outer and 'authentic' inner selves.¹⁰

Kidman's slightly-deepened speaking voice and graceful efficiency of gesture further heighten her veracity as Rae, eliminating any vestigial traces of 'girlishness' that would undermine not only her character's grief, but also the delicate balance of terror and calculating courage she must convey in her cat-and-mouse battle with Hughie (Zane) during the latter half of the film. Here too Kidman's Rae must adopt and cast aside a series of 'public' masks in quick succession, each designed to dupe, seduce, or overpower Hughie in order to save herself, yet still allow enough 'private,' self-revelatory moments to assure viewers of Rae's 'true' emotional state. Perhaps the best example occurs during what is both a sex scene and a rape sequence. Rae seduces Hughie in the hopes of drawing him close enough to shoot him, but when this fails must follow through with her seduction in order to maintain the potentially life-saving ruse of having fallen in love with her captor. Shot in uncompromising close-up while Hughie is on top of her, Rae's face conveys a potent combination of pain, devastation, resolve, and, when Hughie's leering gaze demands it, feigned erotic enjoyment. Kidman's skill is again foregrounded

¹⁰ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 190-191; Counsell, *Signs of Performance*, 63.

through expressive incoherence, evidenced in the critical praise she received for “showing us a woman by turns judiciously passive and shrewdly aggressive, a seemingly frail vessel put to the test of survival,”¹¹ a woman who ultimately proves to be “cool in emergency (and) terrible in retribution.”¹² Since Rae’s retribution escalates from failed attempts with sleeping pills, a knife, and a harpoon gun to ultimately dispatching Hughie with a flare gun to the face, it could be argued that Kidman’s skilful development of her character’s inner life is the only thing that salvages *Dead Calm* from descending into caricature. While viewers have always been more willing to accept on-screen pairings of older men and younger women than the other way around, the fact that the film’s reviews scarcely mention the age difference between John and Rae attests, at least in part, to Kidman’s successful transformation into character.

To Hollywood glamour-conditioned North American moviegoers, however, the impact of Kidman’s appearance almost immediately threatened to overshadow the impact of her acting. In the absence of an established star persona, physical appearance inevitably supplants a lack of detailed biographical information to create certain impressions about the aspiring star’s demeanour and character. It is too reductive to simply say, ‘we judge people based on the way they look,’ but, as Lovell asserts, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of “physical presence”— the “bodies, faces, voices and movements” that inexorably shape our initial impression of the star in question.¹³ In the case of Kidman, her exceedingly rare combination of flaming red ringlets, impossibly fair skin, delicate features, and imposing height (5’11”) meant that

¹¹ Groen, review.

¹² Noel Taylor, *Dead Calm: Suspenseful Thriller*,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, 10 April 1989, B5.

¹³ Lovell, “I Went in Search,” 268.

she was readily identifiable as a stardom-worthy ‘beautiful person,’ yet also somehow decidedly ‘other.’ Certainly Kidman’s audible Australian nationality and visible Celtic ancestry did little to facilitate her assimilation into mainstream leading lady status. After all, Kidman’s Rae doesn’t sun herself in a string bikini like any average bronzed Hollywood starlet, but rather shields herself in an oversize sunhat and long sleeves. Kidman’s height, meanwhile, is evident not only in Rae’s ability — quite literally — to stand eye-to-eye with her captor, but is also foregrounded through a prolonged sequence in the middle of the aforementioned sex scene when Rae must move about the boat wearing only the too-short jacket she has tried (and failed) to cover herself with.

Repeated attempts to categorize Kidman as something recognisable to North American viewers belie how her appearance in many ways exceeded the conventional mould of female star. Many critics likened her to a “softer” and “younger” Sigourney Weaver,¹⁴ “an Amazon for the 90s,”¹⁵ latching onto the fact of Kidman’s similar stature (Weaver is 5’10”) and her placement within a narrative that, not unlike Weaver’s *Alien* series, depicts its heroine triumphant after a prolonged, bloody battle with a seemingly superior enemy. The critical comparisons to Weaver dissipate after *Dead Calm*, and it’s not difficult to see why. While Weaver’s physical presence can either be foregrounded to connote her status as action hero or de-emphasized and softened to suit more conventional female starring roles, Kidman’s pale exoticism and unique physicality were not so readily assimilated, her “wild red hair,”¹⁶ “sensitive complexion,”¹⁷ “striking”

¹⁴ See Taylor, Groen reviews; Rita Kempley, “Dead Calm,” *Washington Post*, 7 April 1989, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/deadcalmrkempley_a09fb4.htm.

¹⁵ Kempley, review.

¹⁶ “Screen kisses spark romance,” *The Calgary Herald*, 22 June 1990, E1.

height,¹⁸ and overall appearance of being sculpted out of marble rather than flesh and bone often functioning in excess of the film roles undertaken during this phase of her Hollywood career. That such roles tended to be either purely ornamental or decidedly icy and opportunistic would collide with Kidman's personal life in such a way that would inexorably shape her early star image.

Cruise, Control, and Celebrity Stardom

Talk about charmed lives. Nicole Kidman **came out of nowhere** to star in *Days of Thunder* with Tom Cruise, went on to marry Cruise, and is now starring with Dustin Hoffman in *Billy Bathgate*. All this with no fairy godmother... Just how does a young woman react to all the sudden limelight, money, and power? **What's it like to be at the top of it all, after such a short time climbing?**¹⁹

Despite an initial critical focus on the 'work' of her performance in *Dead Calm*, Nicole Kidman would assume a new 'role'— that of female star-celebrity, famous primarily for her union with a powerful male star rather than her labour as a performer²⁰ — not long after her arrival in Hollywood. Tom Cruise saw *Dead Calm*, cast Kidman as his love interest in *Days of Thunder* (Tony Scott, 1990) and as his leading lady off-screen shortly thereafter, divorcing then-wife Mimi Rogers to wed Kidman on Christmas Eve of 1990. This tabloid-worthy chain of events largely overshadowed considerations of Kidman's acting ability in favour of debates over the extent to which she'd mobilized a latter-day version of the casting couch; thus, a respected Australian actor with a lengthy resumé was suddenly deemed to have come "out of nowhere" to achieve fame "after such

¹⁷ Strauss, "Glutton."

¹⁸ O'Donnell, "Flaming Star."

¹⁹ Christopher Hunt, "Calm and in control: Kidman takes L.A., marriage to Cruise, and stardom in stride," *The Halifax Daily News*, 12 November 1991, 21. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Geraghty, "Re-examining stardom," 197.

a short time climbing.” Kidman’s role in *Days of Thunder* — Dr. Claire Lewicki, a beautiful Australian neurology resident who falls in love with the race car driver played by Cruise — did little to convince viewers that she could convincingly ‘create’ a transformative character, as the role was specifically tailored to suit Kidman’s background. The fact that Kidman publicly boasted that Cruise had created the role specifically for her did little to enhance her reputation as an actor, nor did her joking admission to Oprah that coming to Hollywood “was instrumental in getting me work, (and) getting me a husband.”²¹

Furthermore, Kidman’s newly-minted star persona became largely defined by the couple’s highly-controlled public image, placing stringent restrictions on press interviews,²² and threatening to sue media outlets that made unsavoury allegations regarding their marriage — for example, that it concealed Cruise’s homosexuality, was a careerist move on Kidman’s part, and that the pair adopted children because one or both of them was infertile.²³ Kidman’s ‘performances’ within various media outlets at this

²¹ See “Cruise Woos With Roses... And A Starring Role,” *The Press Association*, 1 September 1990; “Tom Cruise and Wife Nicole Kidman Give First Joint Television Interview to Oprah Winfrey,” *PR Newswire*, 15 May 1992. Unless otherwise noted, all newswire sources and American magazine/newspaper sources cited in this chapter were found through Lexis-Nexis, accessible at <http://proxy.library.carleton.ca:17284/universe>.

²² For example, Kidman and Cruise refused to give joint interviews during the press junket for *Far and Away*, and drew heated criticism from the press for making attending journalists sign consent forms restricting how material obtained at the junket would be used. See Anita M. Busch, “Media up in arms over studio publicity contracts,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 29 May 1992; Richard Natale, “With press, it’s often war, rarely blitzkrieg,” *Daily Variety*, 7 August 1992.

²³ The couple demanded and received a published retraction from *McCall’s* after a February 1995 article by Dennis Stewart (“Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman: Can they Survive the Rumours?”) speculated on whether theirs was a marriage of convenience. See Rita Zekas, “Mag reverts to Cruise control,” *The Toronto Star*, 19 March 1995, C2; Jeannie Williams, “Retreating from Cruise rumours,” *USA Today*, 3 February 1995, 2D.

time did little to humanize her image. Interviews from this period typically feature an odd paradox — they at once lament the limitations imposed on Kidman's acting career by her status as 'Mrs. Cruise,' highlighting upcoming projects intended to shed this label, while at the same time discuss Kidman's relationship to her husband in gushing detail, often with the intent of 'setting the record straight' regarding Cruise's sexuality or the veracity of their marriage.²⁴ Within celebrity discourse, Kidman's failure to 'manage' her new persona as both actor and wife of a Hollywood superstar — generating instead tension between career ambition and domestic devotion — robbed her of the type of personal authenticity necessary for culturally-valued performance. This perceived inauthenticity prompted one journalist to 'narrativize' Kidman's early career thusly:

Kidman committed a major Hollywood crime — going native too quickly. The Americanization of Nicole flickered by like a tired newsreel: Ingenue lands first big budget movie... Ingenue is cast in unbelievable role (baby-faced neurosurgeon). Ingenue sparks rumours of affair with her leading man (Tom Cruise, still hitched to Mimi Roger). Ingenue ends up in an offwhite vintage bridal gown at a lily-and-rose-festooned arbour with her now-divorced boyfriend... Ingenue is now seen as having it all (famous husband, fast-track movie career, infinite riches). Seven films... and many A-list parties later, the masses can't quite forgive Kidman for her quickie ascent.²⁵

Kidman's early Hollywood films did little to encourage a competing discourse surrounding her work-as-performer. So ornamental and interchangeable were Kidman's roles following *Days of Thunder*, her long-time friend and director Jane Campion dubbed

²⁴ For example, see Jamie Portman, "No strings attached," *Halifax Daily News*, 15 December 1993, 21; Portman, "A role to die for," *Halifax Daily News*, 10 October 1995, 23; Richard Corliss, "An Actress to Die For," *Time Magazine*, 9 October 1995, 89; Bob Strauss, "Kidman's Cruise-Free Career: Roles Beyond Superstar Wife," *Entertainment News Wire*, 21 November 1993.

²⁵ Margy Rochlin, "Nicole Kidman: No longer just Tom Cruise's wife, the Aussie actress takes the lead in Jane Campion's moody *Portrait of a Lady*," *US Magazine*, December 1996, re-printed on *Team Nicole*, <http://www.teamnicole.com/library/articles.php>.

this period Kidman's "Hollywood Handbag" era, a label that also resonated eerily with "off-screen" images of Kidman beautifully dressed, composed, and walking several paces behind her superstar husband at various premieres and public appearances.²⁶ As Drew Preston, a Park Avenue moll to gangster Dutch Schultz (Dustin Hoffman, a close friend of Cruise) in *Billy Bathgate* (Robert Benton, 1991), "Kidman's role involves little more than undressing, sleeping late and skinny-dipping. It looks as though that's all she can handle."²⁷ As leading lady to Cruise once more, this time as a pair of naive Irish newcomers to America in *Far and Away* (Ron Howard, 1992), "Kidman is mainly content to flaunt her pre-Raphealite curls, a golden orb that our director backlights with unbridled glee — here, the narratively trite meets its visual counterpart."²⁸ And as Gail Jones, expectant mother and wife to a man dying of cancer in *My Life* (Bruce Joel Rubin, 1993), "Kidman is, as ever, lovely to look at..." but "frustratingly...(relies) on a tiny palette of emotional registers."²⁹

I include these excerpts from reviews for each film, not as an indictment of Kidman's performances, but rather to illustrate the constraining narrative context of each, as well as the often-scathing tone adopted by even the most credible critics in their evaluation of Kidman. It is also worth noting that Kidman's physical appearance seems to interfere or at least coexist with considerations of her acting. As close analysis of *To Die For* and *The Portrait of a Lady* in relation to the media texts surrounding these

²⁶ See Figure 1. From "The Power of the Red Carpet," *Vogue*, March 2003, 472.

²⁷ Desson Howe, "Billy Bathgate," *Washington Post*, 1 November 1991, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/billybathgaterhowe_a0b358.htm.

²⁸ Rick Groen, "Westward, Ho Hum," *The Globe and Mail*, 22 May 1992, C3.

²⁹ Christopher Harris, "Wring out your hankies," *The Globe and Mail*, 12 November, 1993, D5.

performances will reveal, even Kidman's most transformative and acclaimed screen roles would be coloured greatly by her 'post-marriage' celebrity identity. Ultimately, Kidman's perceived lack of 'labour' in achieving a movie career, combined with the absence of 'real life' warmth and authenticity, prompted these performances to be read in terms of problematic personification.

***To Die For* and Destiny**

Everyone says, 'Oh, you are Suzanne, that's how you played the role so well.' Well, no! I'm an actor, and I created that role.³⁰

In many ways, Kidman's performance as Suzanne Stone-Maretto in *To Die For* confounds conventional attempts to evaluate its transformative authenticity. Although the role of Suzanne demands a sophisticated and multi-layered performance, the fact that this fame-hungry, blindly ambitious weather girl is always 'performing' for the camera (be it real or imagined) makes it almost impossible to read Kidman's acting in terms of its gradual revelation of an authentic inner self. Van Sant's film provides a biting satire of our media-fixated culture, with Suzanne embodying one of its more poisonous by-products. So deluded is Kidman's Suzanne by the TV-mad society that she's grown up in, it's debatable whether she still possesses an authentic interiority to be revealed, or whether she ever did in the first place. (An image of five-year-old-Suzanne, staring hypnotized by the sight of herself on home video, implies that she has always had a picture tube where her soul should be.) Suzanne's obsession with fame so defines her that she wonders aloud: "What's the point of doing anything worthwhile if people aren't watching?" And so Kidman's Suzanne behaves as though she is being watched at all

³⁰ Kidman in Rochlin, "Nicole Kidman."

times, varying her performance according to what she feels the scenario and her audience demands.

The ‘work’ of Kidman’s performance thus entails revealing the different layers of Suzanne’s public and private performances — whether she is perkily addressing her camcorder to provide “an exclusive” on her story to interested film studio execs, addressing the clamouring news media with the solemn dignity and entitlement of a movie star preparing for her close-up, or breathily seducing her teenage lover with the calculating intent of convincing him to murder her husband. Kidman’s Suzanne often vacillates between several different performance modes within a single scene, even within a single shot, a technique that becomes especially foregrounded when she addresses the camera directly. For example, she initially uses a fairly flat, direct tone to introduce herself to her audience as “Suzanne Maretto,” but then stops herself, and apologizes in the same measured tone, since “Suzanne Maretto is my married name.” Her lips then part in a flawless, telegenic smile and her voice shifts into a more melodic, lilting tone (which we will come to identify as her ‘broadcast’ voice) as she informs us that “my *professional* name is Suzanne Stone. *Suzanne Stone*.” However, she quickly retreats from this obvious pleasure in her *professional* identity to play the grieving widow for a moment, conjuring tears and assuring us that there’s nothing wrong with her married name, belonging, as it did, to her dearly departed husband.

During Suzanne’s interactions with other people, the physical component of Kidman’s performance varies in conjunction with her vocal tone in order to highlight Suzanne’s assorted manipulations. Suzanne’s unstoppable, high heels-clicking, hair-flying stride into the local cable channel to ask for a job leaves little doubt that she will

get exactly what she wants. Even when she noticeably softens her demeanour during the interview — sitting demurely, hands daintily folded in her lap, nodding indulgently as the station explains he's only looking for an occasional assistant — the laser-like intensity of her gaze and rapid-fire, carefully-rehearsed nature of her replies betray her ruthless ambition.

Meanwhile, the abrupt shift from Suzanne's tearful, child-like plea to Jimmy (Joaquin Phoenix) to save her from her 'abusive' husband to her seductive, ecstatic dance to "Sweet Home Alabama" just moments later may undermine Suzanne's emotional authenticity, but it certainly reveals the extent of her control — Jimmy's rapt expression as he watches Suzanne dance reveals how helpless he will be to refuse her. As Suzanne's control of the situation begins to unravel, Kidman again charts this dissolution through her voice and body. In dissuading Lydia (Alison Folland) from talking to the police, Suzanne alternates between saccharine sweetness and pure venom, walking arm-in-arm with Lydia and giggling girlishly with her one moment, leaning in close and threatening prison in a cold, hard hiss the next. Ultimately, these two performance modes fuse when Suzanne concludes her final tirade by pulling back from Lydia and standing up straight, fixing her face in bright smile, and concluding cheerfully, "you just keep your fucking mouth shut, alright?"

Despite the challenges that the character of Suzanne posed to conventional interpretations of naturalistic acting, *To Die For* signified the most critically-acclaimed work of Kidman's Hollywood career up to that point. Kidman's performance was

praised as “chilling, delightful,”³¹ “inspired,”³² “smoothly hilarious,”³³ and, due to the many faces of Suzanne that Kidman must assume, “a balancing act of Oscar-ian proportions.”³⁴ However, although the performance earned Kidman a Golden Globe award for best actress in a comedy/musical, it would not merit an Oscar, or even an Oscar nomination — a fact that shocked many industry watchers, as Kidman had been a rumoured favourite.³⁵ An Academy Award is but one measure of a performer’s cultural value, but it is an undeniably significant one, particularly insofar as it has been traditionally viewed as an indicator of both acting prowess and star power.

However, since Kidman’s star persona at the time failed to achieve the necessary balance of proximity to and distance from her character, speculation arose that that she had perhaps not needed to ‘act’ at all. Suzanne was a cool careerist who traded on her looks, married for money, desired fame above all else, and was determined to spend a “short time climbing” to the top — all traits that had been ascribed to Kidman at some point. It was not difficult to view *To Die For* and ‘read’ Suzanne as a fictionalized representation of Kidman’s publicly-available private life. Suzanne’s nickname courtesy of her sister-in-law — “The Ice Maiden” — brings to mind public criticism of Kidman’s cool, aloof glamour image; while Kidman and Cruise chose to adopt children for

³¹ Mick LaSalle, “Kidman Monstrously Good in ‘To Die For,’” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 October 1995, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1995/10/06/DD13291.DTL>

³² Roger Ebert, “To Die For,” *The Chicago Sun-Times*, 6 October 1995, http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1995/10/1000470.html.

³³ Janet Maslin, “She Trusts in TV’s Redeeming Power,” *The New York Times*, 27 September 1995, C11.

³⁴ John Griffin, “Kidman savagely funny in black satire: After a series of unimpressive performances, *To Die For* star shows she’s a superb comic actress,” *The Montreal Gazette*, 6 October 1995, D1.

³⁵ See, for example, Bernard Weinraub, “Lack of Oscar favourites open race,” *The Globe and Mail*, 16 December, 1995, C6.

undisclosed (and highly-debated) reasons, Suzanne's reluctance to have children is career-motivated — because, after all “pregnancy gives you blubber, and boobs out to here,” thus impeding one's journalistic abilities, especially in war zones. Even the film's opening credits suggest a connection to the ‘career narrative’ of its star. Certainly this rapidly edited barrage of tabloid headlines and photos, ‘live’ action, and news footage brings to mind the attendant media hype surrounding Cruise and Kidman. However, it also parallels the perceived lack of authenticity underlying Kidman's persona; so many contrasting images of our heroine flash by in such a condensed period of time — one newspaper shows Suzanne as a fresh-faced weather girl, a tabloid depicts a wicked seductress, and a news report shows an obviously grieving widow — that it becomes impossible to determine which image represents the ‘real’ Suzanne Stone.

Several prominent magazine articles released prior to the release of *To Die For* had only served to heighten the aforementioned tension between career aspiration and domestic devotion that defined Kidman's star persona at the time, a tension that came to a near breaking point when this persona was mobilized in the form of the fatally ambitious Suzanne. An *Entertainment Weekly* profile featured Kidman coyly deflecting public interest in what goes on in the Cruise/Kidman bedroom at night, “even though it is pretty damn good,”³⁶ while the June 1995 issue of *Vanity Fair* likened Kidman to a “heat-seeking missile” in the “relentlessness” of her career pursuits, as evidenced by her bid for comparable box-office clout to Cruise with *Batman Forever* (Joel Shumacher, 1995).³⁷ At the Cannes debut of *To Die For*, Kidman's demeanour and “Barbie-ish” wardrobe

³⁶ Kidman in Benjamin Svetkey, title unknown, *Entertainment Weekly*, 9 June 1995, reprinted on *Team Nicole*, <http://www.teamnicole.com/library/viewarticle.php?id=61>.

³⁷ Author unknown. Article quoted in James L. Dickerson, *Nicole Kidman* (New York: Citadel Press, 2003), 80.

prompted comparisons to her character,³⁸ a comparison further fuelled when Kidman revealed that she had called Van Sant and essentially harangued him until he cast her as Suzanne. “You said you were destined to play the part,” Van Sant recalled in a press conference. “I remember something about not wanting to stand in the way of destiny.”³⁹

That this perceived intersection between star persona and role was problematic for some viewers, and functioned to undermine the perceived ‘value’ of Kidman’s performance, finds resonance in several profiles released following *To Die For*, which adopt a definite tone of “setting the record straight.”

Instead of her performance proving the point that she could indeed act, the conventional wisdom became that she’d finally been given a part that explained the smug uptilt of her nose, and the undisguised expression of want that she wears on her fine Irish-English features. Kidman has clearly worked out the logic for these snipes: Moviegoers tend to blend fiction with fact. “I was acting, I’m not the girl in *To Die For*,” she says, joking that with each successive role, audiences will assume, “So that’s what she is...”⁴⁰

Naysayers convinced themselves that Kidman wasn’t acting. “That suddenly became my personality,” she says. “It stunned me, actually. Some people perceived it as ‘Well, she couldn’t be acting. That has to be her.’ I never expected that in a million years.”⁴¹

Let’s say it right now: Nicole Kidman is no killer. The 5’10 redhead with the face of a pensive pre-Raphaelite has never been accused of anything more serious than criminal gorgeousness... So Kidman is not Suzanne Maretto; and the actress... will heatedly explain why: “Everyone says, ‘Oh, you are Suzanne, that’s how you played the role so well.’ Well, no! I’m and actor, and I created that role. My dream was to be in the theatre and be a great actress; Suzanne’s ambition is to be on TV and be famous. Now I’m playing Isabel Archer—does that mean I am Isabel Archer?”⁴²

³⁸ Janet Maslin, “Critic’s Notebook: Better Days on the Horizon at Cannes,” *The New York Times*, 22 May 1995, C11.

³⁹ “Cannes Film Briefs,” *Associated Press*, 22 May 1995.

⁴⁰ Rochlin, “Nicole Kidman.”

⁴¹ Ian Spelling, “The Portrait of Mrs. Cruise,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 17 January 1997, E1.

⁴² Corliss, “An Actress To Die For,” 89.

Kidman's protests against widely-held perceptions of her inter-changeability with Suzanne signify an attempt at 're-writing' her star persona in such a way that both validates her personal authenticity and reinforces her skill-as-performer. That such efforts were not wholly successful until the revision Kidman's image underwent through her divorce becomes evident through an examination of Jane Campion's adaptation of Henry James' *The Portrait of A Lady*.

Portrait of A Lady-as-Performer

Christine Geraghty cites Nicole Kidman's portrayal of Isabel Archer as a rare example of Method-influenced screen performance from a female star, but largely credits Campion's "visceral direction" and "dramatic use of close-ups" for focusing viewer attention on "Kidman's physical expression of Isabel Archer's voluntary entrapment in the way she walked, stammered and even struggled for breath."⁴³ I'd like to recuperate the significance and accomplishment of Kidman's performance independently of the technical elements of Campion's control before going on to evaluate the potential reasons why this performance failed to earn Kidman the kind of cultural prestige typically associated with Method-influenced male actors.

Although Method acting and the period film may seem strange bedfellows, they are united in Kidman's Isabel as a means of articulating the contrast between the vivid inner world of the once free-spirited American heroine and her external repressed silence once she has been doubly entrapped by a despotic, gold-digging husband and the dictates of 'genteel' European society. Some extraordinary moments are produced as a result: Isabel's fevered fantasy of being seduced by a trio of suitors begins as a prolonged

⁴³ Geraghty, "Re-examining stardom," 198.

medium shot of Kidman, by herself, moving from a languid reverie in which she gently caresses her face and closes her eyes, to a complete physical response, her body registering each sensation until we are by no means surprised when her imagined lovers gradually appear in the frame. Other moments to herself tend to involve such naturalistic, 'private' behaviour as removing her boot and sniffing it, or childishly balancing a candlestick on her head while studying her reflection in the mirror.

Once Kidman's Isabel submits to the charms of the charismatic Osmond (John Malkovich), her 'expressively incoherent' battle between authentic inner and repressed outer selves becomes even more pronounced. Isabel's expression upon realizing her teenage stepdaughter won't venture into the sunlight because her father forbids it articulates the exquisitely-veiled beginnings of what will become terror, although she quickly masks this fear to provide comforting words to the child. And the way Kidman convincingly fluctuates between attack and retreat during Isabel's final confrontation with her malevolent husband — struggling for words and breath one moment then aggressively chastising Osmond's "malignant" mind and clawing at her temples the next — communicates a complex co-existence of fear and hatred that her smooth, aristocratic exterior can no longer contain. At one point, Isabel becomes so overwhelmed with frustration that she actually bangs her head against the wall.

Such outbursts, combined with Method-ic inarticulateness and prolonged silence (all recurring traits of Kidman's Isabel) don't play well when a film's heroine is expected, to some degree, to make the audience fall in love with her.⁴⁴ Repeatedly, critics deemed

⁴⁴ James' novel elaborates greatly on how Isabel delighted prospective suitors with a Molotov cocktail of beauty, intelligence, and high-spiritedness, traits that were deemed largely absent in Kidman's portrayal, but were also absent from the film's screenplay.

Kidman's performance cold, distant, and responsible for Isabel seeming nothing more than a victim, or, worse still, a cipher:

We hear that Isabel has "changed so much." Ralph, Goodwood and Warburton all see in her a new "coldness." How can they tell? All I saw was Kidman, with her hair done up in Mousketeer-like twin peaks, behaving primly. When was Isabel warm?⁴⁵

Isabel Archer, as rendered by Nicole Kidman, was faulted for her "catatonic coolness,"⁴⁶ a motif perhaps best encapsulated in David Denby's assertion that "drifting and inarticulate, Isabel doesn't seem quite there."⁴⁷ What has been overlooked in these assessments is the fact that, during her reflective silences, Isabel isn't supposed to be quite there; rather, she is at first submerged in her own inner landscape of dreamy reverie, intoxicated by the possibilities of life, and later in the search for the personal resolve to escape circumstances that have made her seem the willing victim. That Kidman conveys this personal voyage more subtly and naturalistically than some of the more mannered Method performers that have gone before her may be a disadvantage here. The 'normalcy' of female behaviour demanded by contemporary film narratives may not be nearly so tightly circumscribed as it was in the postwar era, but it would appear there are certain traits — unhelpful, 'unrevealing' silence being one of them — that are still ill-accepted within female performance.

Such inarticulateness appears particularly problematic when taken in conjunction with Kidman's 'icy' off-screen persona at the time. (In her profile of Kidman for *US*,

⁴⁵ Barbara Shulgasser, "Lengthy, oblique treatment may test viewers' patience," *The San Francisco Examiner*, 17 January 1997, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/e/a/1997/01/17/WEEKEND708.dtl>.

⁴⁶ Richard Schickel, "Blurred Vision," *Time*, 30 December 1996, 153.

⁴⁷ David Denby, "Lady Stuck," *New York Magazine*, 24 December 1996. <http://www.newyorkmetro.com/nymetro/movies/reviews/4608/>.

Rochlin points out that *Portrait of a Lady* “will do nothing to disabuse the American public of the notion that Kidman is chilly by nature.”⁴⁸ Not only does Isabel’s usual ‘external’ mask of aloof self-possession mirror the controlled exterior of Kidman’s public image at the time, but Isabel’s swift ascension from wide-eyed, wild-haired young ingénue to impeccably coiffed society wife may have also come too perilously close to Kidman’s own rise from wild-haired Aussie actress to Hollywood celebrity wife to be contained wholly in the context of the film’s narrative.

Kidman’s use of interviews suggests an attempt to create a discourse on the work of her acting through discussion of her own physical and emotional immersion in the role of Isabel. Of her decision to have her waist cinched to 19 inches by a rib-crushing corset, Kidman stressed it was crucial not just for Isabel’s fashion-induced physiognomy, but also to provide her with a physical parallel to Isabel’s emotional pain: “It wasn’t a vanity thing. This woman was in an emotionally abusive relationship. You have to go there. You can’t pretend.”⁴⁹ Of her own personal investment in the character: “There were times I felt I was going insane. It was five months of losing who I was in an attempt to find Isabel. Sometimes I’d cry and be unable to stop.... Which is what Jane wanted... She wanted me to live it.”⁵⁰

This latter quote suggests the often contradictory nature of transformative authenticity — that one must ‘lose oneself’ in the role and transform into character, but shed one’s own tears and risk one’s own sanity in the process. But this contradiction, in Kidman’s case, may have been too foregrounded for viewers to accept; after all, how can

⁴⁸ Rochlin, “Nicole Kidman.”

⁴⁹ Ann Oldenburg, *USA Today*, 12 January 1997, M1.

⁵⁰ Matthew Gilbert, “Nicole Kidman: A candid portrait of a lady on her own,” *The Boston Globe*, 12 January 1997, N1.

an actor who so jealously guards her privacy (thus denying readers/viewers a privileged sense of her 'authentic' self) and presents an aura of outward perfection expect viewers to believe she can truly 'live' and feel the true emotions of Isabel Archer? That Kidman's work-as-Isabel culminated in Kidman's physical collapse at the end of filming functioned less as a proof of her labour than it did as a media-circulated anecdote about Cruise playing doting, worried house husband.⁵¹

In the intervening time between *The Portrait of a Lady* and Kidman's divorce from Cruise in early 2001, Kidman's *performances* gained increased recognition, but I would argue that this notoriety did not necessarily coincide with a substantial increase in cultural value for her overall image. Instead, a near-obsessive critical and popular fixation on Kidman's body-as-spectacle threatened almost wholly to displace its significance as site-of-performance. Although Kidman's chameleonic stage work in *The Blue Room* (1998) entailed her successful impersonation of no less than five different characters ranging in age from 17 to 40 and their respective accents, Kidman's performance became known (even infamous) primarily for the critical reverence surrounding her five seconds of on-stage nudity — "pure theatrical Viagra," as Charles Spencer of *The London Daily Telegraph* so bluntly put it.⁵² Meanwhile, *The New York*

⁵¹ These discussions of craft also tended to be prefaced by a discussion of how Campion nearly withdrew the role when she viewed Kidman's Hollywood performances, and that the role was secured only after an extensive audition, two revelations that significantly undermined Kidman's already tentative 'value' as performer. Furthermore, Campion's perceived control over Kidman's acting grants Campion at least joint ownership of the performance as rendered — many articles refer to a kind of highly collaborative 'Campion boot camp,' which in part entailed Campion stripping Kidman of all that the director viewed as her 'mannerisms.' (This brings to mind Geraghty's argument about the centrality of Campion's camera work and editing to Kidman's performance.)

⁵² Charles Spencer quoted in Alan Riding, "Sometimes the Player's the Thing," *The New York Times*, 22 November 1998, E27.

Times review of *The Blue Room*'s Broadway incarnation demonstrates how even those 'highbrow' critics who derided such superficial evaluations ultimately reinforced this myopic focus, even granting Kidman's physiognomy metaphorical power. Wrote Ben Brantley, "The entire evening is not unlike Ms. Kidman's much-discussed body: smooth, pale, and slender."⁵³ Meanwhile, media-centred gossip began to circulate that many ticket buyers for its sold-out runs in London and on Broadway were scrambling to get the best seats from which to view the stripped-down Kidman.⁵⁴

The opening frames of *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick, 1999) did little to dispel Kidman's growing reputation as an "enthusiastic exhibitionist": "Kidman, her back to the camera, snake-hip(s) out of a black dress, to stand there nude in possibly the most beautiful human image ever to open a movie."⁵⁵ Much has been written about Cruise and Kidman's lengthy collaboration with Stanley Kubrick's final film, and its voyeuristic examination of a sexually-troubled married couple that was made even more voyeuristic through its intentional casting of a (much speculated upon) married Hollywood couple. However, for the purposes of this study, we must note three things: first, the Method-influenced elements of Kidman's acting (expressive incoherence and an iconography of neurosis in particular) are strongly on display here, but are primarily limited to a pair of monologues in which she confesses her imagined/dreamed adulteries to her husband. Second, although Kidman was widely acknowledged as out-acting her famous spouse, the pair as an 'on-screen' married couple was largely dismissed for their perceived lack of authenticity. Finally, the work of Kidman's acting again appears overshadowed by a

⁵³ Ben Brantley, "Fool's Gold in the Kingdom of Desire," *The New York Times*, 14 December 1998, E1.

⁵⁴ Riding, "Sometimes." Scalper prices were supposedly driven to as much \$1000 apiece.

⁵⁵ Jack Kroll, "Dreaming with 'Eyes Wide Shut,'" *Newsweek*, 19 July 1999, 62.

narrative foregrounding (and critical focus upon) her body. Her most striking monologue occurs while wearing a transparent camisole, and Kubrick favours medium shots that leave all or most of her body in the frame, prompting one reviewer to comment that Kidman seems “almost absurdly comfortable acting without clothes.”⁵⁶ Again, the distinctiveness of Kidman’s physiognomy is crucial to the seemingly disproportionate level of attention it receives. Although slender and toned in a manner appropriate to Hollywood standards of thinness and beauty, Kidman’s height, fair complexion, and a relative lack of feminine ‘curves’ all function to differentiate her from the majority of female stars (and frequently, their body doubles) who appear naked or scantily clad on-screen. So distinctive is Kidman’s body, there can be little doubt that it is the ‘genuine’ article on display.

This focus on body-as-spectacle connects more notably to questions of transformative authenticity and the female star than it may initially seem, especially when it gives the impression of surface taking precedence of over depth. One irritated letter-to-the-editor criticized *Newsweek* for putting Kidman on its cover (with the cheekily-titled feature article, “Nicole Takes Off”), noting the irony “of a woman stripping to the buff onstage and ‘fighting for her privacy’ at the same time.”⁵⁷ The contradictory nature of Kidman’s star image during this period was perhaps best summed up by a newspaper columnist who contrasted two disparate images of Kidman present on newsstands at the same time — one a dedicated and primly-dressed wife and mother featured in the pages of *Good Housekeeping*, the other a scantily-clad, flirtatious daredevil who playfully climbs into bed with her interviewer in *Esquire*. Although unable to decide “which

⁵⁶ J. Hoberman, “I Wake Up Dreaming,” *Village Voice*, 27 July 1999, 59.

⁵⁷ Editorial, *Newsweek*, 18 January 1999, 18.

Nicole is real,” the author glibly concludes that “hey, an actress can play any role she wants.”⁵⁸ This statement suggests that superficial role play (whether it entails prim clothes, revealing clothes, period clothes, or no clothes whatsoever) is all that defines Kidman as both star and actor; the changes she undergoes on-screen and off are mere manipulation, not a genuine search for a workable, if malleable, public identity. As Chapter Three will demonstrate, Kidman’s success in publicly re-shaping her persona as one of inner authenticity and professional skill coincides with the humanizing spectacle of her divorce.

⁵⁸ Nate Guidry, “The Two Nicole Kidmans,” *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 5 September 1999, F4.

Chapter III

The Show Must Go On: 'Revision' and Authentication in *Moulin Rouge* and *The Others*

Inside celebrity journalism, an acceleration in the perception of biographical time follows from the tying of the persona — as compensation for the intermittency of professional engagements — more closely to the private lives of the stars. The milestones of private existence (romance, infidelity, marriage, divorce, illness, parenting) are treated as profound existential transformations... As written or as interviewed, the stars become characters in the dramas of their own biographies. Each life transition seems like assuming a new role.¹

I used to say, 'Wow, my hat is off to a woman who has to do it by herself,' and now I'm a single mother. It's amazing the way life twists and turns... in terms of doing it alone, that's scary. It's a whole new path I'm about to walk.²

As one of the most widely-publicized 'milestones' of star existence in the past decade, Nicole Kidman's 2001 divorce from Tom Cruise signified a highly-mediated 'existential transformation' of Kidman's star persona by way of her private life. However, despite the typical intermittency of professional commitments King observes in relation to such media-accelerated biographical transitions, Kidman's transformation was, in actual fact, further accelerated by the resonance of her personal life and public behaviour in not one but two contemporaneous screen roles — that of a lovestruck-but-doomed courtesan in *Moulin Rouge* and an overwrought single mother in *The Others*. As this chapter will demonstrate, this phase in Kidman's career narrative ultimately signifies her preliminary success as intertextual performer, foregrounding a newly-humanized public persona — 'revised' through her emotional media performances — that intersected positively with her

¹ King, "Elastic Self," 51.

² Kidman in Nancy Rommelmann, "Nicole Kidman: Women Who Have Made Me the Person I Am Today," *Marie Claire*, May 2001, re-printed on *Team Nicole*, <http://www.teamnicole.com/library/viewarticle.php?id=12>.

assumption of these two vastly different but equally sympathetic and critically-hailed screen performances.

As closer examination of Kidman's performances in *Moulin Rouge* and *The Others* in relation to their critical reception will reveal, this period marks a significant recognition of Kidman's acting, not as 'role playing' or personification, but rather as culturally-valued work that is both true to story and true to self. Although both roles utilize recognisable components of Kidman's media-established glamour image, the distinctive, immersive requirements of each as well as their vast difference from and chronological proximity to one another mean that certain demands of transformative authenticity and Kidman's success or failure in meeting them must be addressed.

Self-revelation and the celebrity interview

The interview has always been one of the principal guarantors of the star's ordinariness and availability, and thus a mechanism for controlling resentment of their special status: through the interview, the star becomes just an ordinary person talking to the reader as anyone else would do, and gives the reader access to their extraordinary lives. The intimacy of the relation mediates the star's otherness: both the mode of address and... the fact that some aspects of the 'private life' may appear as a paradigm of the reader's experience or aspirations, serve to bind the star and audience together.³

If any star's "otherness" required significant mediation, it was Kidman's prior to her divorce. As Britton points out, celebrity discourses such as star interviews appear to grant the reader privileged access to the 'real' — and, underneath all the trappings of glamour, presumably ordinary — star, a revelation often necessary for audience belief in the star's film roles. As Dyer asserts, the 'authenticity' viewers demand in a star's performances as genuine expressions of inner emotionality is not unlike the 'authenticity'

³ Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: Star as feminist* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 38-39.

— however constructed — they demand in the star’s ‘real’ life, with each new character and/or interview peeling back the camouflage to reveal another facet of the star’s “true” self.⁴ After all, the star interview provides a performance context not unlike the film narrative. The star may reveal carefully-selected personal details and behaviours that inexorably shape reader/viewer interpretation of the star’s ‘character.’ This is especially the case when such revelations are framed by the interviewer as ‘exclusives’ and/or genuine moments when the star ‘opens up’ with the type of intimacy typically reserved for closest friends and family. Such constructed intimacy is heightened, not diminished, by the ever-expanding number of outlets for it. As King asserts

the multiplication of public and private information about stars reinforces the notion of true meaning and authenticity. Somewhere in the hypertext of celebrity, a morsel of the star’s activities will unlock the enigma of identity.⁵

Furthermore, certain questions or circumstances may create moments of media-based expressive incoherence in which the ‘real’ star falters and struggles to regain composure, attempting to maintain his/her public mask of controlled professionalism while allowing some degree of apparently genuine interiority to escape. Public knowledge of the actor’s personal history and career narrative will only enhance reader/viewer belief in and interpretation of this interiority.⁶ As with the visible/audible signs of ‘authenticity’ that define Method-derived performance, whether or not such moments are truly genuine or

⁴ Dyer, “A Star is Born,” in Gledhill, *Stardom*, 132-139.

⁵ King, “Elastic Self,” 51.

⁶ Hence King’s assertion that the most successful stars must somehow manage to “re-write” their personas while acknowledging that their past personas still occupy the same discursive space. In this sense, King’s model of stardom espouses careful ‘revision’ of star personas rather than wholesale disavowal and re-invention. While media-savvy star consumers may be more amenable to fluctuations in star personas given the greater diversity of discourses that shape their construction, the need for some sort of unifying force behind the image—the star’s ‘identity,’ however malleable — still remains. *Ibid.*, 52.

just another actor's 'trick' is irrelevant. If they are presented and 'performed' within the media as truthful, they will likely be accepted as such, and thus contribute to public belief in an actor whose complex and multi-layered psyche informs each character he or she plays.

That audiences felt they lacked access to Kidman's 'real,' ordinary self — or that she perhaps lacked such authentic interiority altogether — was evident during the first decade of her Hollywood career and the reception of her most prestigious and challenging early films. Without significant revision of her publicly-performed persona, which had been marked by a tension between career ambition, domestic devotion, and a certain controlled coolness, Kidman's ubiquity after her divorce as she promoted a pair of high-profile star vehicles could have been viewed as the opportunistic ploy of a career-obsessed female star. Instead, Kidman's frankness, open emotionality and keen sense of humour had precisely the opposite effect. Her visible struggle to re-define herself as a newly-single woman and artist not only aligned Kidman meaningfully with her on-screen characters — it also offset previous public resentment of her 'extraordinary' life with the knowledge that Kidman, like so many readers/viewers, had identity problems too.

Shocked and devastated: "A war for the hearts and minds of the public"

At the risk of venturing into *Hard Copy* territory, it is relevant to recount briefly the media coverage of the Kidman/Cruise divorce for two key reasons. First, it demonstrates Kidman's increasing agency in terms of managing and responding to 'uncontrolled' media discourses that could negatively impact her persona.⁷ Second, it

⁷ By 'uncontrolled' I mean any media coverage that the star has not knowingly agreed to in the form of either an interview or sanctioned publicity for a film. Frequently, such discourses centre on gossip, rumour and scandal.

exemplifies how rapidly star persona fluctuations may now occur within celebrity journalism. Kidman and Cruise announced their separation on Feb. 5th, 2001, citing “difficulties inherent in divergent careers, which constantly keep them apart.”⁸ Media speculation initially hypothesized Kidman — she of the less-sympathetic public image than her ‘all-American’ movie hero husband — as the instigator. Possible causes included Kidman’s affair with another man, her decision to conclude their alleged “sham” marriage now that she was suitably famous, or her rejection of Scientology as the chosen religion for their adopted children.⁹ However, each star’s media-constructed ‘role’ in the event began to shift notably when Cruise filed for divorce several days later, and reports from named and unnamed ‘friends’ of Kidman began to surface, describing the actor’s “shock” and “devastation” at Cruise’s decision to end their marriage.¹⁰ (Cruise responded cryptically through his lawyer that Kidman “has always known exactly why they were divorcing.”)¹¹ Kidman then responded to Cruise’s divorce petition with an exceedingly

⁸ Excerpt from statement issued by the couple’s publicist, Pat Kingsley, quoted in Leah Garchick, “Cruise, Kidman separate,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 February 2001, E1. Unless otherwise noted (and with the exception of *Vanity Fair* and *Good Housekeeping*), all newswire, American, and international magazine/newspaper sources cited in this chapter were found through Lexis-Nexis, accessible at <http://proxy.library.carleton.ca:17284/universe>. All Canadian newspaper articles cited in this chapter were found through Proquest Canadian Newsstand, accessible at http://www.library.carleton.ca/eresources/db_descriptions_1.html#cdnnewsstand.

⁹ See, for example, Hugh Davies and Simon Davis, “Couple with eyes wide open for a starring role: Kidman and Cruise driven by ambition and secrecy,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 February 2001, 5; Shinan Govani, “Hollywood’s royal couple is no more: Kidman, Cruise blame split on ‘divergent careers,’” *National Post*, 6 February 2001, A2; Arlene Vigoda, “Religion may have split up Tom, Nicole,” *USA Today*, 7 February 2001, D2.

¹⁰ See, for example, Shinan Govani, “Nicole’s eyes were wide shut to impending divorce,” *National Post*, 12 February 2001, D3; Anne-Marie O’Neill et al, “Cruising for control,” *People Weekly*, 26 February 2001, 74; Susan Schindehette et al, “Far and away,” *People Weekly*, 16 April 2001, 98.

¹¹ From “Entertainment News in Brief,” *The Toronto Star*, 6 May 2001.

detailed document that, when paraphrased in one newspaper article, constructed a melodramatic narrative in which she was decidedly the unwitting victim:

DIVORCE SHOCKED KIDMAN- A pregnant Nicole Kidman begged Tom Cruise not to end their marriage, but he stormed out and Kidman ultimately miscarried the baby they had recently conceived, according to court papers filed by the actress. Kidman, in a response to a divorce petition filed in February by Cruise on the grounds of irreconcilable differences, said she was caught by surprise when the *Mission: Impossible* star told her he no longer wanted to be married.¹²

Publicized across a wide range of media outlets, Kidman's response also indicated that she pleaded with her husband to enter marriage counselling but was ignored, and that Cruise had falsely claimed that their separation had pre-dated their tenth wedding anniversary so as to avoid making long-term support payments.¹³ By the time *Moulin Rouge* premiered at Cannes in May of 2001, Cruise's role as the less-sympathetic of the two stars was beginning to crystallize.¹⁴ When Kidman received her Academy Award nomination for *Moulin Rouge* nine months later, one magazine referred to the public spectacle of the Cruise/Kidman divorce as "a war for the hearts and the minds of the public in which Nicole, against all odds, seems to be winning."¹⁵

Kidman's re-emergence in the public eye to promote *Moulin Rouge* would allow her multiple opportunities to further revise her persona via the relatively 'controlled' media discourses of interviews and press conferences. Kidman's above description of the "scary" new role she must assume as a single mother in her first interview since her

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kidman's legal response and Cruise's divorce petition were both leaked to The Smoking Gun, an Internet site that publishes potentially scandal-causing legal documents, lawsuits, contract demands, etc of the stars, and their details then publicized. See <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/nkresponse1.html>. See also O'Neill et al, "Cruising for control," *People Weekly*, 26 February 2001, 74.

¹⁴ See Jamie Portman, "Press prefers Nicole to Tom," *The Windsor Star*, 17 May 2001, E6.

¹⁵ "The Show Really Must Go On," *Hello*, 5 February 2002.

divorce functions in two ways: it not only binds star and reader together through the potentially ‘shared’ experience of personal identity crisis, but it also demonstrates a degree of emotional self-revelation previously lacking in Kidman’s interviews. In facing the hundreds of journalists who swarm Cannes every year, Kidman was praised not only for her dedication to her work in promoting the film despite her personal travails, but was also embraced for the seemingly genuine vulnerability she demonstrated while doing so. The tension between work and private life, once so problematic in Kidman’s persona, was eased as she opened up about her day-to-day struggle to do her best in both realms:

“It’s surreal. I did have a miscarriage, and I’m still coping with that.” As for the divorce, “there are two kids involved, and the press is not the place to play it out... I could have said ‘I’m not going to do any press for this film. See ya later. I’m not coming out until I am completely healed.’ But I don’t know if that will ever happen.”¹⁶

In the context of interviews, Kidman’s authenticity was often ensured by frequent struggles to find the right words to express her feelings, as was the case at the New York premiere of *Moulin Rouge*:

You know, I’m moving on. Moving forward. And I think— even in this film, this film is about the possibilities of your future, and so I’m sort of really — I’ve got a lot of great friends and I have a really strong family support.¹⁷

Similarly, when Kidman struggled to explain to Oprah the “nightmare” of divorce while attempting to guard certain details for the sake of her children’s privacy, her nervous fidgeting and stammering inarticulateness delineate her ‘performance’ of emotional devastation as indisputably sincere.¹⁸ Within print interviews, the journalistic tendency to describe Kidman’s vocal tone (speaking “softly,” “quietly,” or “tearfully”) and body

¹⁶ Jess Cagle, “Madame Moulin,” *Time Canada*, 14 May 2001, 50.

¹⁷ Nicole Kidman to CNN at New York premiere of *Moulin Rouge*, 18 April 2001.

¹⁸ See “Kidman tells Oprah: Divorce is ‘a nightmare,’” *Ottawa Citizen*, 19 May 2001, F7. .

language as somehow underlining her fragile emotional state suggests an unspoken desire to portray her sympathetically:

“I’ve never been in this position before,” Kidman said, speaking softly and hugging herself, as if for protection. “It’s slightly surreal. You feel very exposed. I’m looking forward to going home and just resting. It’s strange. I know I’ll look back on this period and (feel) I’m not sure quite how I got through it.”¹⁹

Looking pale but composed, Kidman confesses: “My hands are shaking. I’m very nervous. A lot of things have happened to me in the last four months which have been very difficult, and this is the first time I have talked about it.” ... Kidman nervously twists her ringless fingers as... she tries to put into words her shock at being so publicly humiliated by a husband she thought loved her. “It gave me wisdom,” she says hesitantly... “Anything that involves suffering and pain makes you a wiser person. It’s part of the journey of life. I am 33 years old and it is what I am dealing with... I don’t have an overall plan. I just do my best as a mother and my best as a woman and hope it will be good enough.”²⁰

Of course, Kidman’s resilient bravado during certain portions of her public re-emergence post-divorce were also crucial to her newly-humanized persona. A keen, self-deprecating sense of humour co-existed with moments of emotional vulnerability to grant readers/viewers the impression of a complex, layered performance, Kidman’s good spirits functioning in part as yet another ‘brave face’ mobilized to mask her unease:

You were expecting a woman destroyed. Some tears, a hitch in the throat, maybe a crumpled tissue or two. Possibly even a slap in the face when you dared use “Tom Cruise” and “miscarriage” in the same sentence. But you get none of this from Nicole Kidman... Instead, you get laughter and snappy banter. You get a black sleeveless top with a plunging neckline and an alarmingly mini miniskirt, risking peril with each cross of her long legs.²¹

¹⁹ Stephen Schaeffer, “Portrait of a dame,” *Boston Herald*, 28 May 2001, O31.

²⁰ John Hiscock, “Kidman carries on: Says she still doesn’t know why Cruise humiliated her so,” *National Post*, 7 May 2001, D1.

²¹ Jeff Jensen, “First Tango in Paris,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 25 May 2001, re-printed on *Team Nicole*, <http://www.teamnicole.com/library/viewarticle.php?id=37>.

Kidman's televised response to David Letterman's query about her divorce — "At least I can wear heels again," a dig at her diminutive ex-husband — also mobilized public perception of Kidman as a far wittier, sassier dame than previously acknowledged, two qualities essential to her portrayal of Satine in *Moulin Rouge*.²²

By the time the divorce had been finalized and Kidman had completed promotional duties for both *Moulin Rouge* and *The Others*, a distinctive shift in her public persona had taken place, a shift that coincided with Kidman's successful inauguration as intertextual performer. Although this shift will be better understood through close analysis of Kidman's film performances and their reception, it is perhaps best summarized by the profile that accompanied Kidman's photo spread as *People* magazine's "Most Beautiful Person" for 2002 — a photo spread that was shot with the express purpose of capturing "someone inviting and warm."

Once considered icy and aloof, Kidman has become a movie star to root for. "The big shock when I met her was that she was the complete opposite of all the things you imagine from pictures of her and Tom in magazines," says *Moulin Rouge* director Baz Luhrmann. "She's this really Aussie girl who's full of life and has this loud, honking laugh"... The actress welcomes the change in the way audiences perceive her. "People didn't know me before and I had no idea," she says. "I must have been really cut off. I was quiet, really quiet. But in the last 18 months, that has just kind of evaporated." Kidman gracefully handled the probing questions about her heartache from Oprah and Letterman and everyone else as she tirelessly promoted *Moulin Rouge* and *The Others*. "Some women come up to me now, and a lot of them have gone through the same thing," she says.

²² Kidman's newly-accessible image was particularly striking when compared to the media reticence of her ex-husband while promoting *Minority Report*. A sample excerpt from the July 2002 issue of *Premiere*: "You've got lingering questions. Okay. And? I really don't give a shit. My life is not the fodder of the fucking gossip tabloids. If there's going to be a question there, fuck 'em. Get a fucking life... It's over, it is history, and ah, ... we're both moving forward."

“Whether it’s divorce or a break-up, there’s a kind of camaraderie that’s very poignant.”²³

Thus, Kidman’s cold, opportunistic “career wife” persona is explained away as photographic trickery and misinterpreted ‘shyness’ (a sign of psychological depth and intensity rather than aloofness), the resentment fans once felt towards her extraordinary life replaced with sympathetic identification and camaraderie. A recurrent media emphasis on Kidman’s “bravery” in facing the press while in the throes of a “deep personal crisis” was crucial in this persona re-definition. However, similarly crucial was Kidman’s repeated admission within interviews that, despite her divorce, she remained a true romantic who believed in love above all else. This romanticism, combined with Kidman’s newfound emotional authenticity, would resonate strongly through the character of Satine in *Moulin Rouge*.

Truth, Beauty, and, above all else, Love

With everything that has happened in my life, I’m so glad I made a love story... (*Moulin Rouge*) is a classic love story that somehow feeds your own belief in love as well. I play a woman who learns about falling in love after she’s been hurt. She abandons herself to love. She’s fearless.²⁴

The show must go on. I am still a romantic. I believe in destiny and I believe there is a soulmate out there for every one of us. I am determined to keep believing that.²⁵

Although the dizzying fictive universe of Baz Luhrmann’s post-modern musical *Moulin Rouge* may seem an unlikely home for culturally-valued performance, the character of Satine so clearly intersects with the humanization and revision of Kidman’s

²³ Alex Tresniowski et al in “Nicole Kidman: The 50 Most Beautiful People 2002,” *People Weekly*, 13 May 2002, 76.

²⁴ Kidman in June 2001 issue of *InStyle*, quoted by Hugh Dougherty, “Kidman will ‘always be sad’ over split with Cruise,” *The Press Association*, 21 May 2001.

²⁵ Kidman in Hiscock, “Kidman carries on.”

public persona and star image as a whole that its significance in her progression towards transformative authenticity cannot be overstated. Furthermore, while *Moulin Rouge* may not typify the kind of realist dramas that are usually home to Method-influenced acting, the sheer demands of starring in a film that requires singing, dancing, and a multi-layered acting style places a renewed emphasis on performance within Kidman's screen work.

From our first glimpse of Kidman's Satine in *Moulin Rouge*, we are invited to engage with and question the remote, inauthentic star image that, prior to the humanizing impact of divorce, had become associated with Nicole Kidman. Pale and flawless as marble, top-hatted and cinched into a sparkling corset and fishnet stockings, the flame-haired Satine sits almost motionless on a trapeze high above the heads of Moulin Rouge patrons gathered, in reverent silence and anticipation, to gawk at her. More than altitude separates Satine from the lowly crowd below — a harsh spotlight isolates her both within its boundaries and its chilly blue glow. The pre-lapsarian silent movie goddess comes to mind, as do countless flawless, 'frozen' red carpet images of Nicole Kidman, Celebrity Wife. As she sings the first few husky notes of "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" in glacial close-up, we prepare ourselves for an exceptionally aloof version of Dietrich's Blue Angel rather than the red-hot charisma and endearing vulnerability of Marilyn Monroe.

Then something rather unexpected happens. A jazzy thrum of music kicks in, the warm flood of the Moulin Rouge house lights replaces Satine's spotlight, and her trapeze begins to drop and circle her dangerously closer and closer to the cheering male masses, who have snapped out of their reverie and are now intent on reaching up to touch her. This elision of distance between spectacle and spectator is no accident — the beaming Satine, now lit with a warm, radiant glow, seems to revel in holding an audience captive.

It is a transition that catches viewers as off-guard as Kidman's public transformation did. Just as Kidman re-wrote her public persona as warm and sympathetic by engaging with and subverting past 'misconceptions' of her coolness and inauthenticity, her opening performance as Satine condenses the thawing of her screen image into the discursive context of a single scene.

This not only functions to validate Kidman's newly-humanized image as an intertextual one, but also allows her to foreground a multi-faceted performance style that combines naturalistic acting, near-Brechtian theatricality, and sheer athleticism. Kidman's singing voice is surprisingly strong but still identifiably 'her own,' revealing a talent unexplored in her previous film roles. And as Satine leaps to the stage and shimmies her way through the rest of the number with equal parts showmanship and kittenish, seductive zeal — at one point straddling a particularly ardent admirer whilst crooning the chorus of Madonna's "Material Girl," and later throwing herself into the adoring crowd — it is remarkably easy to forget that Kidman's Satine is having to sing, dance, and act wearing a vice-like silver corset and three-inch stiletto heels all the while. The 'labour' of her performance is only hinted at once Satine has ducked underneath the swishing skirts of her Can-Can dancers for a quick costume change. Whilst changing, she tries out a series of personas in order to figure out which will best seduce the wealthy Duke: "Bright and bubbly?" she giggles breathily, then drops her voice, tilts her head downward and adopts a come-hither stare, "Or smoldering temptress?" It is only a fleeting moment of expressive incoherence that allows the viewer access to the 'real' Satine underneath the performed bravado. When Zidler reminds her that the Duke could finance her dream of becoming a legitimate actress, Satine's quick intake of breath and eyes-downcast stare as she repeats

his words (“A real actress...”) reveal her presumably ‘genuine’ self. Mere seconds later, Satine tosses her hair and widens her eyes in an apparent attempt to shake herself out of this self-reflection, reassuming her showgirl mask and leaping out on stage again with renewed enthusiasm.

Ultimately, this layered performance style proves essential to Kidman’s successful embodiment of her dual role as the worldly ‘star’ seductress/chanteuse of the Moulin Rouge, and the dreamy aspiring actress who “abandons herself to love.” Kidman develops two, almost opposed styles of performance for the musical numbers and dialogue associated with each ‘role.’ The former is a sexually-predatorial, controlling courtesan who “can’t fall in love,” as evidenced by the calculated dance of seduction she performs for the Duke, punctuated by the same “oohs” and “ahs” featured in her stage number. The latter, meanwhile, is a hopeless romantic who can be swept off her feet by a heartfelt love song, evidenced by Satine’s softer vocal tone and relaxed physical presence in her scenes and songs alone (“One Day I’ll Fly Away,”) or with Christian (“Come What May,”) as well as her palpable devastation when she realizes they can no longer be together. The less-theatrical costuming, hair, and make-up of Kidman’s Satine within these scenes further enhances this impression of relative naturalism. The two styles are ultimately collapsed during the final act of ‘Spectacular, Spectacular,’ when Christian (Ewan McGregor) invades the diegesis of the show and is reunited with Satine in the last moments before her death. The staginess of Satine’s elaborate costumes and performance style are undercut first by her illness, which causes her to gasp for breath periodically, and second by her inability to control her true feelings for Christian, calling out to him with their ‘secret song’ and ultimately collapsing in his arms. Satine’s ‘true’ identity as

hopeless romantic is thus privileged, although her skills as courtesan/performer are crucial to her final moments of self-expression.

I'd like to suggest that Kidman's layered, seemingly authentic performances within the media discourses surrounding the film appear to have functioned, for some viewers at least, as validation of Kidman's similarly-layered screen performance. As outlined above, a similar duality of external bravado and genuine inner emotionality defined Kidman's off-screen persona at the time, thus authenticating Satine as a suitably 'true to self' performance:

The part, which had her running off not with the rich producer but instead with the struggling writer, undercut (Kidman's) public image as a cool careerist and plainly rendered her human and warm... The fact that in this film she died as a heroine passionately committed to her art, a victim of her time and her circumstances, carried over to the perception of her as a victim in real life — a perception to which there seems to be more than an element of truth.²⁶

As Sischy points out, certain intersections between persona and role give Kidman's portrayal of Satine added resonance to those viewers aware of the publicly-available media discourses shaping Kidman's image at the time — and vice versa. Since Kidman was sympathetically perceived as 'victim' during the public spectacle of her divorce, Satine's own, highly-romanticized victimhood was easily conflated with that of its star. Just as Kidman's shock and devastation at the prospect of divorce functioned to authenticate the 'truth' of a marriage previously plagued by rumours of its falsity, it also functioned to transform her previously aloof screen image into one sympathetic enough to manage high comedy, high tragedy, and the status of romantic heroine. Kidman's seemingly heartfelt post-divorce accounts of how her marriage had been built on an "all-consuming, mad-

²⁶ Ingrid Sischy, "Nicole's New Light," *Vanity Fair*, December 2002, 366.

passionate” kind of love from the moment the still-married Cruise had “swept her off her feet”²⁷ (as well as her public admission that “I am a romantic, and I still believe in love,”)²⁸ could function, for some viewers, to authenticate the intensity of the whirlwind secret romance between Satine and Christian. Furthermore, Kidman’s well-documented vulnerability (expressed through both speech and gesture) while fulfilling publicity duties for *Moulin Rouge* didn’t just help legitimate the emotionality of her acting; this fragility also seemed to mitigate the imposing ‘otherness’ of her physical presence. As David Edelstein notes:

The movie actually benefits from Kidman’s recent marital woes: you can project a certain tremulous vulnerability onto her normally robotic sex-kitten act, and her squeezed waist and toned, chalky thighs can be interpreted as signs of romantic yearning instead of a supermodel’s steely obsession with fitness.²⁹

Indeed, the film’s critical reception tended either to explicitly or implicitly link Kidman’s performance as Satine to her own off-screen revelation of the flesh-and-blood person behind the idealized image. In both her ‘stage’ performances and her backstage trysts with Christian, Kidman’s Satine was deemed more “alabaster and flame”³⁰ than cool marble, revealing warmth and energy deemed largely absent in her previous performances. Reviews of the film feature repeated critical acknowledgement of this shift in Kidman’s screen image, noting that “Kidman’s usually icy screen persona thaws invitingly”³¹ to

²⁷ Sischy, “Nicole’s New Light,” 364.

²⁸ Liz Smith, “Nicole Standing Tall, *Good Housekeeping*, November 2001, 188.

²⁹ David Edelstein, “Miracles are Cheap,” *Slate Magazine*, 18 May 2001, <http://www.slate.com/id/106186>.

³⁰ Todd McCarthy, “Moulin Rouge,” *Variety*, 14-20 May 2001, 21.

³¹ Rick Groen, “Voulez-vous couches a Monmartre?” *The Globe and Mail*, 1 June 2001, <http://www.globeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/movie/MOVIEREVIEWS/20010601/RVMOUL>.

render her performance as Satine “cracklingly sexual.”³² Despite the ahistorical theatricality of their surroundings, the romantic relationship between Satine and Christian was deemed highly authentic; as one reviewer stated, “Kidman and McGregor connect in ways that make credible the notion of falling in love over a song.”³³ So believable was this connection, rumours of an affair between Kidman and McGregor began to circulate, a speculation some reviewers couldn’t resist:

Nicole Kidman is Satine, the embodiment of forbidden class and available sex in an alabaster body and a hot red wig... frankly, the chemistry between (Kidman and McGregor) is all the reason Tom Cruise ever needed to wonder if his marriage was in trouble.³⁴

As a star previously faulted for the ‘robotic’ nature of her screen romances — especially those which co-starred her then-husband — Kidman’s newfound believability as romantic heroine further validates her growing range as a performer.

This heightened focus on Kidman’s re-defined persona did not wholly displace considerations of the ‘work’ of her acting. The arduous preparations that went into singing and dancing rehearsals were well-documented in interviews and profiles of Kidman, as were the injuries she sustained during some of the more gruelling performance numbers. (A twice-broken rib stalled the production for six weeks, while a badly injured knee thanks to the high heels and a fall down a flight of stairs during the “Diamonds Are A Girl’s Best Friend” number forced Kidman to finish the shoot with the help of painkillers, rehearsing her songs while laid up at home, and shooting her remaining close-ups on crutches.)³⁵ Although Kidman’s use of media discourses to detail the transformative ‘work’ involved

³² Stephanie Zacharek, “Moulin Rouge,” *Salon*, 18 May 2001, http://dir.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2001/05/18/moulin_rouge/index.html.

³³ David Germain, “Moulin Rouge,” *Associated Press*, 14 May 2001.

³⁴ John Griffin, “Moulin Rouge,” *The Montreal Gazette*, 1 June 2001, D1.

³⁵ See, for example, Jensen, “First Tango;” Cagle, “Madame Moulin.”

in her acting becomes far more pronounced in her interviews surrounding *The Others* and especially *The Hours*, the press surrounding *Moulin Rouge* features an active discourse on performance far more prominent than in Kidman's media-centred discussions of her previous Hollywood films. Much like in the publicity surrounding *Dead Calm*, Kidman's commitment to creating a convincing character becomes quite literally mapped across her body — previously best known for the way it looked in *haute couture* — and the injuries it sustained. Kidman's/Satine's body may function distinctly as spectacle in *Moulin Rouge*, but it is also clearly marked as a site of performance.

Having successfully revised her publicly-performed persona as one defined by its endearing bravery, romanticism and emotional authenticity, I would argue that Kidman's performance as the similarly brave, vulnerable, and hopelessly romantic Satine was inevitably viewed as more 'positively' emotionally truthful (or 'true to self') than any of her previous roles. This authenticity was further validated by the visible 'work' Kidman invested in her performance. Favourable critical reviews, a Golden Globe Award and an Academy Award nomination could all be interpreted as markers of the cultural recognition Kidman's performance in *Moulin Rouge* received. However, the significance of this role to Kidman's success as intertextual performer becomes more fully understood upon consideration of her performance in *The Others*.

Method, Motherhood, and *The Others*

You have two kids and there's times when you say, 'I just want to curl up in a ball and never get out of bed.' And then you have a six-year-old coming in and saying 'Where's breakfast?' It's my journey, I didn't expect it to happen and it has happened, that's it.³⁶

³⁶ Kidman on *The Parkinson Show*, broadcast on BBC1 on 13 October 2001, transcript reprinted on *Team Nicole*, <http://www.teamnicole.com/library/viewarticle.php?id=16>.

There was a time when *The Others* could have been a problematic choice for Nicole Kidman. The role of Grace — a severe English housewife protecting her children from the ghostly intruders that stalk their Jersey mansion — confronts Kidman's previously icy star image even more directly than Satine did in *Moulin Rouge*. Grace's chilly, ramrod-straight exterior is inevitably reminiscent of the type of aloof performance that Kidman was faulted for in *The Portrait of A Lady*. However, released just four months after *Moulin Rouge* and six months after her divorce, Kidman's performance in *The Others* was heralded for precisely the kind of 'transformative authenticity' associated with culturally-valued acting. I'd like to suggest that *The Others* confirmed Kidman's emerging status as both respected actor and intertextual performer, depending as it does on Kidman's successful evocation of a transformatively 'true to story' character that is also 'true to self' — which is to say, true to her newly-revised public persona. (Interestingly, even in the short time between *Moulin Rouge* and *The Others*, Kidman's post-divorce persona is re-worked slightly — towards issues of motherhood rather than romanticism — in relation to her performance as Grace.) Kidman's use of media discourses to point to the 'craft' of her acting also becomes more pronounced with *The Others*, a trait that will become fully developed in her promotion of *The Hours*.

Our introduction to Grace in the opening moments of *The Others* couldn't be any more different from our first encounter with Satine in *Moulin Rouge*. Grace appears not as spotlight-fixed diva but rather as disembodied voice — the crisp, measured voice of an upper-class Englishwoman reading her children a bedtime story about the darkness and emptiness of the world before God created it. ("Now, children, are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin. This story started many thousands of years ago...") A

seemingly odd choice for the creation of pleasant dreams, it is a Biblical tale that we will soon learn resonates eerily with the situation of Grace and her two children, whose allergy to light keeps them isolated in their darkened Jersey mansion at the end of World War II. The cool authority and assurance of Grace's voice is that of a woman forcing herself to stay in control of what she later calls an "almost unbearable" situation for the sake of her children. It is an authority that we will see Grace struggle to maintain, and progressively lose hold of, as the film progresses. Of course, this authority is almost immediately undermined by our actual first *sight* of Kidman's Grace; an exterior shot of the oppressive, fog-bound mansion cuts to a tilted extreme close-up of Grace waking up from what we presume is a nightmare with a piercing scream. She gasps for breath, clutches her pillow, and then wipes her cheeks fiercely in the hopes of erasing any traces of tears. Her breath coming slower now, she checks her watch, sits up in bed, and rolls her eyes heavenward as she struggles to regain composure.

This introduction thus establishes the two extreme performance registers Kidman will have to oscillate between throughout the film. That both extremes are equally chilling and believable in these initial moments is significant in and of itself. However, as the viewer's governing consciousness throughout *The Others*,³⁷ Kidman must also convincingly lead us through her ongoing progression from restraint to fearful near-hysteria, from chilly exterior to beleaguered but fiercely loving and protective mother, from what Counsell and Geraghty would likely term the performance of her 'repressed' outer self to the revelation of her authentic 'inner' self.

³⁷ Viewer knowledge of events is limited to Grace's own awareness of them, despite a few brief asides that suggest the servants 'know' something Grace doesn't.

It is a progression that must be traced across the narrative but often even within the context of a single scene. This is evident in Grace's sudden transformation from commanding 'mistress of the house' as she shows the new servants around, tersely cataloguing rule after rule in a harder version of her authoritative bed-time story voice, to pitiable, struggling single mother who stops dead in her tracks and tenses her shoulders when asked about the master of the house, confiding in an eyes-downcast near-whisper that he'd gone to war and there had been no news since. Grace's chilly armour is reassembled in an instant, however, when she curtails proffered sympathy with an arched eyebrow and asks, "Which one of you does the cooking?"

As Grace's emotional fragility becomes compounded by the presence of seemingly ghostly intruders, the apparent gap between Grace's repressed outer and authentic inner selves becomes narrower and narrower. The sound of inexplicable footsteps transforms the stern woman working fastidiously on her needlepoint into a breathless, wild-eyed creature, ransacking the junk room to find the source of the noise. Her daughter's eerie drawing of a 'family' of ghosts dissolves Grace's assurance that there is no such thing, prompting her to load a shotgun and, darting eyes lit by candlelight, frantically search the house. Once capable of reassuring her young son that his father would be home as soon as the war is over, Grace finds herself choking on the words and dissolving into tears outside the children's bedroom, clutching the clothes in her husband's closet and sobbing his name. Ultimately, it is only our belief in Kidman's performance of Grace's horrifying emotional and psychological journey that secures our sympathy for her character, not to mention our belief in the film as a whole. After all, it is Grace and her children, not the intruders, who are actually ghosts, the "unbearable" nature of Grace's darkened isolation

having driven her to smother her children and shoot herself in a moment of temporary insanity.

For Kidman's progressive revelation of Grace's volatile interiority to be wholly convincing, her performance must inevitably call on the tenets of Method-derived performance. The aforementioned oscillation from her repressed outer to authentic inner self, as well as a clearly-marked iconography of neurosis, can be readily traced across Grace's increasingly agitated manner. Her authoritative manner of speech is progressively replaced with tearful and/or breathless inarticulateness or silence, while her controlled appearance gives way to multiplying visual markers of inner disturbance, such as darting, widened eyes and frenetic abruptness of movement. There is also a perceptible shift from Kidman's/Grace's body as spectacle (elegantly thin and statuesque, clad in flawlessly-tailored, Grace Kelly-style suits, perfect shoulders-back-head-up posture) to site of performance (running from room to room, wielding a shotgun, ready to throw herself between her children and anything that dares endanger them). Given these foregrounded performance signs and our final realization of Grace's murderous actions, it would have been quite easy for Kidman to fall into the perceived 'traps' that Method-derived performance can set for female actors. Kidman's Grace could easily be demonized as victim or villainess, or, worse yet, dismissed as merely 'mimicking' the emotions associated with transformative authenticity and culturally-valued acting.

Critical reception of the film, however, suggested quite the contrary. Reviews of *The Others* repeatedly stress the 'value' of Kidman's performance; critics praised not only Kidman's emotional veracity as Grace, but also her mastery of her craft-as-actor, creating

a character defined by both her “steely determination” and the ominous sense that “her nerves are quietly going to pieces:”³⁸

Kidman has thrown herself into her role as if it were Lady Macbeth on the London stage, with formidable results. Though Kidman doesn’t hesitate to make Grace high-strung and as tightly wound as they come, she also projects **vulnerability** and **courage** when they’re called for. It’s an intense, involving performance, and it dominates and energizes a film that would be lost without it.³⁹

Channelling both **emotional transparency** and another era’s larger-than-life diva glamour, her Grace is pretty, pallid, fragile and sharp-edged as a porcelain doll head. We’re never quite certain whether to fear her, or fear for her. Like great silver screen stars of yore, Kidman does more than act here: She fascinates, holding camera and viewers spellbound.⁴⁰

While Kidman’s performance in *Moulin Rouge* was praised for the way it ‘thawed’ the star’s screen image, her work in *The Others* was widely hailed for mobilizing the ‘icy’ component of her image in such a way that ultimately guaranteed maximum sympathy for her character:

The icy reserve that sometimes stands in the way of her expressive gifts here becomes the foundation of her most emotionally-layered performance to date...she lifts her character above the conventions of the story into a realm of volatile, frenzied feeling made all the more poignant by her furious efforts to maintain control.⁴¹

The perceived authenticity of Grace’s ongoing battle between ‘frenzied feeling’ and ‘furious efforts to maintain control’ thus validates Kidman’s use of Method-influenced acting technique.

It is possible that Kidman’s oft-described/presented iconography of neurosis in interviews at the time — many of which enact a kind of struggle between brave outer self

³⁸ Kirk Honeycutt, “The Others,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 6 August 2001.

³⁹ Kenneth Turan, “Kidman Proves Haunting,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 2001. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁰ Dennis Harvey, “The Others,” *Variety*, 6 August 2001. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ A.O. Scott, “Now, Which of You are Dead?” *The New York Times*, 10 August 2001, E1.

and devastated inner self, especially in regards to her miscarriage and the future of her children — could have functioned, for some viewers/critics, as legitimating Kidman's ability to perform such an emotional battle on screen. However, the discourse on acting Kidman generates in discussions of *The Others* suggests less a direct correlation between her on and off screen performances than it does a more complex negotiation between star and role, one that implies Kidman's dedication to more broadly Stanislavskian principles. Certainly widespread public sympathy for Kidman as a newly-divorced, vulnerable-but-loving single mother inevitably inflected public perceptions of the fragile, abandoned Grace. Interviewers were eager to point out that, "since making the film, Kidman is, irony of ironies, a single mother,"⁴² while Kidman attempted to shield her children from the public glare of the media with a protective ferocity reminiscent of her character. But Kidman also put forth an increased ownership of her performance in interviews surrounding *The Others*, describing in detail, not just the strict voice work she undertook to master Grace's English accent and demeanour, but also the 'inside-out' emotional process she undertook in 'becoming' the character.

Kidman had been determined to find Grace's pathos and portray her, not as demonized "shrew," but rather "someone you can feel for, because everything comes from her desire to be a good mother."⁴³ Ultimately, that discovery was made through Kidman's own emotional connections to motherhood. In preparing for the role, Kidman found herself so horrified by her immersion into the psyche of a woman who murders her two children that she actually tried and failed to pull out of the film. By the time cameras

⁴² David Gritten, "The Other Nicole," *Telegraph Magazine*, August 2001, re-printed on *Team Nicole*, <http://www.teamnicole.com/library/viewarticle.php?id=34>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

rolled, Kidman's own inner turmoil over playing the part had helped her arrive at the psychology and physicality of the character:

Every part of me, every cell in my body said no. I couldn't sleep. I was terrified, I thought my kids wouldn't forgive me, that it was a sin to be doing it. It was the most extreme reaction I've ever had... this was a physical reaction against the themes of the film.⁴⁴

I resisted at first, which was perfect, because by the time I started I was actually so wound up, I was having nightmares. It had really seeped into my consciousness.⁴⁵

In other words, the 'work' of Kidman's transformation into the character of Grace — a notable departure from the "alabaster and flame" Satine — entails a careful balance between personal empathy and creative distance. Kidman highlights her emotional connection to character, articulated through Grace's every gasp and tremble, yet her mastery of the performance is never in doubt. This Stanislavskian balance between self-revelation and control within culturally-valued performance will be better understood through detailed discussions of *The Hours*, *The Human Stain*, and *Cold Mountain*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Kidman in special features documentary for DVD of *The Others*.

Chapter IV
**The Lady Vanishes?: Transformative Authenticity in *The Hours*, *The Human Stain*,
 and *Cold Mountain***

*I wasn't trying to mimic her. I just wanted to capture the truth of her emotions... But how do you show an inner life onscreen?*¹

In turning to a discussion of Kidman's recent film work, it is first worth noting the sheer volume and variety of roles she has taken on since 2002, as such diversification is a hallmark of the established star performer.² However, this accelerated diversity poses a significant challenge to the carefully-managed relationship between celebrity persona and screen performance Kidman achieved immediately following her divorce. How was she to speedily re-negotiate her off-screen 'identity' in relation to not one but three transformatively authentic performances in films that were all released within a year of one another — as troubled author Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*, abused cleaning woman Faunia Farley in *The Human Stain*, and Civil War-era Southern lady Ada Monroe in *Cold Mountain*?³ All three of the aforementioned characters intersect meaningfully with Kidman's sympathetic, post-divorce persona insofar as they are all brave, vulnerable-yet-resilient women who enact a struggle to survive the circumstances life has dealt them. However, by virtue of her physical traits, emotional presence, or some combination thereof, each individual character necessitates subtle adjustments of persona and performance style that Kidman alternately succeeds in achieving (as in *The Hours*), fails

¹ Kidman in Joan Anderman, "Women of the Hours: In transforming herself into Virginia Woolf Kidman found strength in their shared despair," *The Boston Globe*, 5 January 2003, N13.

² Although each film varies in terms of how much it mobilizes or disguises Kidman's star glamour, all five films released in the past 18 months feature a Kidman performance that is drastically different from the one that preceded it, and typically visibly and/or audibly different from Kidman's off-screen appearance and demeanour.

³ *The Hours* was released in December 2002, *The Human Stain* in October 2003, and *Cold Mountain* in December 2003.

to achieve (as in *The Human Stain*), or partially succeeds in achieving (as in *Cold Mountain*). The varied reception of each film and Kidman's performance therein suggests that, while Kidman's recent career trajectory at once suggests emergent opportunities for the female star, volatility and vulnerability remain a key facet of this intertextual model of stardom. This is especially the case when the given performance employs both Method-influenced technique and a wholesale re-invention of the star's established public image.

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?: Personalization, Catharsis, and Transformation in *The Hours*

The Hours opens with Virginia Woolf's suicide, a flurry of words and images that ultimately rely on Kidman's 'transformative authenticity' to give them meaning: a houndstooth coat being tied around a fragile frame, a rough-hewn, ink-stained hand, the urgent scratching of fragile-yet-dignified handwriting, a deep, filterless-cigarette voice: "Dearest: I fear I am going mad again." It is a voice even devout Kidman fans won't recognize, gravelly, tremulous and an entire octave lower than usual. The veracity of this voice is particularly crucial in the film's opening moments, as it is Virginia's 'voice' (both actual and writerly) that controls the film's two other, interwoven narratives through the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

These opening moments force us to decide whether or not we 'believe' in Kidman's Woolf as our governing consciousness throughout the film. Virginia's voice remains grave and sensible as she informs her husband Leonard that she cannot put him through another 'dark' season of her illness, the only tremor of instability registered in a brief pause, a slight tremble of her hand, and the frustrated admission that, "you see, I can't even write this properly." As the scene shifts from fragmented close-ups of Woolf

writing her suicide note to the deadly purposefulness of her walk towards the river where she will drown herself, it is the simultaneous authority and vulnerability of this voice, in conjunction with the hunched angularity of Kidman's stride and the look of determination on her face, that ultimately permits us to view Woolf's suicide as both a tragedy and a kind of choice.

Once the film has flashed back to Woolf writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the external physical changes Kidman underwent to look like Woolf — the infamous prosthetic nose and dowdy wardrobe in particular — and the visible changes in her famously-photographed physiognomy wrought by her intense internal commitment to an emotionally authentic portrayal of Woolf. As Brian Bates points out,

while make-up and costume can help, the actor's presence *in character* alters his appearance considerably... An actor can look different from his usual self because he is different 'inside.' Entering into the psychological, mental, emotional world of a character can result in startling physical changes.⁴

Whether she was in costume or not, Kidman remained immersed in the character of Woolf for the entire five weeks of rehearsing and shooting *The Hours*. The resulting physical changes are indeed startling, especially in comparison to Kidman's always-radiant red carpet persona. Virginia's stooped, round-shouldered posture bespeaks an urge to be ever-smaller, while her awkward angularity in any remotely social situation suggests that she'll never be quite small enough. Kidman's height, thinness, and pale complexion function as an uncharacteristic advantage here. Although these traits usually imbue her characters with sensual elegance (as in *Moulin Rouge* and *To Die For*) or

⁴ Bates, "The Way of the Actor," 94-95.

ramrod-straight frigidity (as in *The Others* and *The Portrait of a Lady*), in *The Hours* Kidman manipulates her usually-graceful frame to convey a heroine ill-at-ease with many facets of her life, including her physicality. Her head perpetually tilted downward, Kidman's Woolf views the world through hooded eyes that can't seem to decide whether they should look upon it with amusement or apprehension. So complete is Kidman's metamorphosis, it doesn't so much conflict with her established, glamorous star image as displace it entirely — we as viewers are so freed from the usual 'meaning' of Kidman's striking physical appearance that we may actually believe that her character could look in the mirror and shudder at what she sees.

Of course, Kidman must also convey the emotional truth of her heroine without being accused of the kind of histrionics or troubling silences perceived in Method-influenced female actors past, Kidman herself included. Kidman's performance bears the recognisable markers of work and 'cultural value' typically associated with Method acting — the emphasis on the body as site of performance rather than pure spectacle, the character-driven focus on gesture and expression, the inarticulate speech and/or meaningful silence that has previously been privileged in male performers. However, Kidman punctuates Virginia's silences with physical behaviour and facial expressions that tend to 'speak' quite revealingly on her behalf, thus mitigating the 'threat' of unhelpful female silence with a higher order of expressiveness: Virginia's tendency to pause for a barely-perceivable instant before she leaves or enters a room, for example, as if weighing the decision whether or not to face whatever is on the other side of the wall, or to shove her right hand into her dress pocket and pull the garment away from her as though protecting herself with it, or to silently mouth the words of her novel as she

devises them. Through communicative gesture, these details substantiate the emotional complexity of a character that could have easily been reduced to one-note hysteria or, worse yet, utter caricature. Furthermore, during the two scenes that demand emotional outbursts of Virginia — the first a distressed plea to her sister, the second a confrontation with Leonard at a train station — Kidman controls her vocal tone and volume so that the slightest modulation may convey her feelings.⁵

I would also argue that Woolf's acknowledged mental illness does not invalidate her (and thus, Kidman's performance) as yet another 'Method madwoman' whose behaviour is only made appropriate by her condition, a judgement based on my interpretation of Kidman's Stanislavskian faithfulness to the 'truth' of the film text.⁶ The Virginia we are aligned with for the duration of the film is a faithful representation of the way Woolf herself supposedly experienced life between bouts of depression and hallucination: with a remarkable lucidity, aware that her extraordinary mind would soon be under siege again and hence determined to use it as much as possible in the intervening time.⁷

Apart from the framing scenes of Woolf's suicide — and, again, it's worth noting that even this is depicted as Virginia's conscious decision in order to spare her husband further pain — *The Hours* spans a single day in which Virginia is alternately consumed by the writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* and her desire to be freed from the rural confinement

⁵ Softened volume and staccato speech rhythms are employed when Virginia implores of her sister, "Say something, Vanessa. Didn't you think I seemed better?"; a stronger, deepened voice is utilized when Virginia must assure Leonard that it is she, not her illness, 'speaking' her desire to move back to London: "It is *mine*. It is *my voice*."

⁶ In her DVD commentary for *The Hours*, Kidman speaks effusively about wanting to honour a "wonderfully-written, subtle, complicated screenplay adapted from a subtle, complicated novel."

⁷ See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London : Chatto & Windus, 1996).

prescribed by her doctors. The only voice Virginia hears repeatedly in *The Hours* is her own — her inner, writer's voice, more authoritative and articulate than the one she uses in daily life, whispering line after line of a novel that resonates through the other two narrative threads of the film. Kidman's Virginia is indeed a woman divided between her authentic inner and repressed outer selves, but Kidman's performance suggests that these two polarities are occupied by "art" and "life" respectively, rather than the demonizing oppositions of "madness" and "sanity." Kidman portrays Virginia's moments of creative inspiration as a kind of trance-like spiritual transcendence that her daily life seems intent on intruding upon. As evidenced by Virginia's focused obliviousness to her giggling nephews during tea with her sister's family, lips moving soundlessly as she debates whether or not to kill her heroine, Virginia's struggle is, above all, one to maintain some degree of balance between her creative mind and expectations of proper female behaviour. The effect is humanizing and heartbreaking rather than demonizing or gratingly neurotic. As Vanessa tells her daughter, "your aunt is a very lucky woman, Angelica. She has two lives: She has the life she's leading, and the book she's writing. This makes her very fortunate indeed."

"A passionate sort of obsession"

Everything is affected by the characters I'm playing... I mean, it's 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. It's an obsession... And so, that's what I give. I don't know any other way to do it. I have a passion for the work... I don't know how to explain it, but it's a passionate sort of obsession.⁸

Everything Virginia was dealing with, I was at a stage when I was dealing with the same. It was a cathartic experience.⁹

⁸ Charlotte Chandler, "Nicole Kidman: It's What's Inside That Counts," *Another Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2003, 151, 157.

⁹ Kidman in "Nicole's Hours of Torment," *Global NewsWire*, 13 April 2003.

The Hours represents Nicole Kidman's most acclaimed attempt at transformative authenticity thus far in her career, a success that intertwined the multi-faceted performance skills evident in Kidman's portrayal of Woolf with her media-based discussion of the role — her first post-divorce screen performance — as both creative outlet and form of 'catharsis.' Given Kidman's training as an actor, this oscillation between personal revelation and discussion of craft may be the most effective method of legitimating her claim to culturally-valued performance. Kidman's acting coach, the Strasberg-trained Susan Batson, stresses a Stanislavskian approach to 'personalizing the text;' whereas Strasberg encouraged his students to 'replace' the character they were playing with their own, emotionally-authentic selves, 'personalizing the text' entails empathy over substitution — the actor draws parallels between their own life and that of the character in order to heighten identification, but ultimately must 'become' the character rather than the other way around.¹⁰ By alternately stressing her personal connection to Woolf and her 'work' in creating the character, Kidman succeeds in revising her persona in support of her role but also maintains an appropriate distance from it.

The earlier tension between Kidman's professional and personal lives now eased through the public spectacle of her divorce, Kidman's interviews describe a newfound passion for immersing herself in her work that, even to the casual reader, sounds uncannily reminiscent of the way *The Hours* depicts Woolf's absorption in her writing. Just as Virginia experiences her most creative moments in a trance-like state, so too does

¹⁰ Jason Zinoman, "P. Diddy's Broadway Crash Course," *The New York Times*, 25 April 2004, AR1.

Kidman become ‘inhabited’ by her characters to the exclusion of all else. One interview describes Kidman in a kind of ‘trance,’ oblivious to distraction or even personal injury, when in character,¹¹ while another relates how Kidman’s voice deepened to a Virginia-like rasp as she recalled playing the writer, admitting “there’s something in her soul that I connected to on a very deep level... She touched me.”¹² Interviews of this period tend to highlight — both explicitly and implicitly — similarities between Kidman and Woolf, such as the experience of family life intruding upon one’s creative life:

It’s just that I spent 11 years of my life committed to something else, really. I was dedicated to my relationship rather than to work. It wasn’t even a choice, it was just what it was—that was where my passion was. And now I’ve come out of that. There’s so much in me I want to say, that I feel, that I have existing within me, and it’s coming out.¹³

Journalists eagerly read Kidman’s own devastation into her heartbreaking performance as Woolf, while Kidman fuelled this inference in admitting that, during the rehearsal process and shooting of *The Hours*, her own emotional turbulence heightened her empathy with Woolf and thus helped her ‘personalize the text.’

When Woolf set her pen to paper, it was less a grand gesture by a distinguished artist than a troubled woman’s small, brave step toward surviving her life. And so it was for Kidman, who accepted the part at a time when she could hardly imagine setting forth from her bedroom, let alone taking a film that would require her to scavenge the darkest folds of her own ravaged personal life... ‘I said yes, then I tried to pull out. I thought I was too raw. I didn’t want to make this movie; I didn’t want to work at all. But thank god that I did it.’¹⁴

Virginia came along at a time when I really needed her. It was the most difficult time in my life, and I was playing a woman — one of the great minds of the world — in the most difficult time of her life. To enter into

¹¹ Sischy, “Nicole’s New Light,” 325.

¹² Lisa Mullen, “Don’t Let Anybody Break Your Spirit,” *Time Out*, 22 January 2003, 10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴ Anderman, “Women of the Hours.”

her thought processes at that time was wonderful for me, educational and freeing. She was in pain, yet she worked with it.¹⁵

Kidman explicitly links herself to her character through their mutual experience of ‘the most difficult times of their lives,’ a parallel that further points readers/viewers to the authenticity of the emotions they see on screen. In her post-Oscar press conference, Kidman went so far as to say that “getting to play Virginia at this point in my life saved my life... Thank God I had the chance to express myself through this character at this time.” With that, even Virginia’s suicide, which frames the film, takes on an entirely new resonance; while Meryl Streep asserts that she would ‘die’ if she lived in the skin of her most difficult characters, Kidman intimates that she would die if she didn’t.

Furthermore, Kidman’s repeated descriptions of the very real work she invested in transforming into Woolf point readers and viewers to her virtuosity and dedication as a performer. Profile after profile catalogues the ‘absorptive’ process she underwent to ‘become’ Virginia, each of them a badge to the kind of actorly commitment most readily associated with male performers like DeNiro. She learned how perfectly to emulate Woolf’s distinctive handwriting, which also entailed learning to write with her right hand. She isolated herself in a country cottage in the weeks surrounding the shoot, studying Woolf’s books, letters, and recordings. She smoked dozens of handrolled cigarettes a day, and claims the voice just ‘appeared’ one day — not as a mimicry of Woolf, but *her* interpretation of Woolf’s voice while ‘living’ the part. This discourse on acting has a two-fold effect: It not only delineates the worth of Kidman’s acting by pointing to the very real labour involved in it, but it also establishes just enough distance between star

¹⁵ Kidman in *Premiere*, November 2002, re-printed on *Team Nicole*, <http://www.teamnicole.com/library/viewarticle.php?id=75>. Author/title unknown.

and role, stressing that, despite her intense personal connection to Woolf, Kidman was ultimately creating the character and not simply ‘playing herself.’

Kidman’s Best Actress Academy Award for *The Hours* provides one measure of the perceived cultural value attributed to her performance, while critical reviews provide another, equally significant evaluation. Repeatedly, reviews of *The Hours* laud Kidman’s performance as both transformative and authentic, praising Kidman, not for her masterwork at mimicry and role-play, but rather for her genuine physical and emotional embodiment of Woolf. The observation that “Kidman does more than step into the role of Woolf, she descends into her”¹⁶ expresses a recurrent theme in evaluations of Kidman’s acting — that her performance exceeds mere physical transformation to evoke “the savage inner war waged by a brilliant mind against a system of faulty wiring”¹⁷ and “convey the sense of a crystalline intellect raging against and fearfully aware of an encroaching plague.”¹⁸ This is certainly not the type of struggle easily communicated through a rubber nose and floppy hat. Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* goes so far as to assert that Kidman delivers what may be the performance of the year for any actor, male or female.¹⁹

Viewed in relation to Kidman’s Oscar-nominated performance in *Moulin Rouge* and the unexpected box office success of *The Others*, the reception of Kidman’s performance in *The Hours* signified the most ‘culturally-valued’ phase in her career narrative to that point. In October of 2003, *Entertainment Weekly* put Kidman on the

¹⁶ Anderman, “Women of the Hours.”

¹⁷ Stephen Holden, “Who’s Afraid Like Virginia Woolf?” *The New York Times*, 27 December 2002, <http://query.nytimes.com/search/full-page?res=hours>.

¹⁸ Dennis Lim, “Dances With Woolf,” *The Village Voice*, 25-31 December 2002, <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0252/lim.php>.

¹⁹ Holden, “Who’s Afraid?”

cover of its annual ‘Power Issue,’ declaring her the most influential actress in Hollywood. Not only was Kidman ranked 10th overall in a survey of the 101 “most powerful people in show business”— at number 10, only two male actors (Tom Hanks, at #3, and Tom Cruise, at #7) ranked above her in terms of overall clout.²⁰ However, while for male stars on the list, ‘power’ was defined as some combination of acting skills, box office prowess, and ability to get projects made, for Kidman, ‘power’ entails balancing her “gifted,” “award-worthy” performances in daring films with her “eminently marketable celebrity” in order to embody the new gold standard of female stardom: “the glamour-girl artist, sexy *and* respected.”²¹ That this balance is a tenuous, even impossible one for even the most accomplished intertextual performers to maintain will become evident through an examination of *The Human Stain*.

‘Out, Out Damn Spotlight:’ Glamour, performance, and authenticity in *The Human Stain*

Nicole Kidman is a chameleon on the silver screen. But on the red carpet, she’s as steady as the North Star — serene, elegant, flawless.²²

As outlined in Chapter I, a paradox exists between the often-gritty, self-revelatory film roles that are typically valued as ‘work’ within North American film performance and the flawless celebrity glamour that, for female stars, must be maintained both within surrounding media and the majority of their screen roles. Unless such transformative, edgy roles are managed carefully both within the film’s narrative and the star’s discussion of them, there can be a problematic dissonance between the former, on-screen

²⁰ See “Power 2003: How Nicole Kidman Became the No. 1 Actress in Hollywood,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 24 October 2003, 30-31. Two of Kidman’s most lauded male peers in terms of ‘transformatively authentic’ screen performance, Russell Crowe and Johnny Depp, were ranked #12 and #33, respectively. See 31, 50.

²¹ “Power 2003,” 30.

²² Sally Singer, “Master Class,” *Vogue*, September 2003, 644.

image, viewed as ‘hard work’ and the product of a rich interiority, and the latter glamour image, presented as ostensibly effortless and perceived as external/superficial. While films such as *Moulin Rouge* and *The Others* mobilized certain elements of Kidman-as-glamour image in support of her character, and *The Hours* strove wholly to eliminate or defamiliarize these traits, *The Human Stain* represents a problematic case wherein Kidman’s star charisma distractingly exceeds the realistic boundaries of her character, an emotionally-damaged, working class woman who initiates an affair with a professor twice her age. As Faunia Farley, Kidman clearly attempts to achieve the same type of transformative authenticity she accomplished in *The Hours*, but fails adequately to revise her performance style, physical appearance and off-screen persona in relation to her character.

Just as our introductions to Kidman’s characters in *Moulin Rouge*, *The Others*, and *The Hours* are instrumental to how we will ‘read’ them over the course of the narrative, our introduction to Faunia Farley is similarly revealing. However, while the aforementioned three films established the layered and emotionally-rich performance style Kidman will employ throughout and ground it convincingly in her physical presence, our first encounter with Faunia in *The Human Stain* establishes a troubling duality between Kidman’s performance style and her appearance. This duality is exacerbated by the way Faunia is shot, costumed, and positioned (both figuratively and literally) within the narrative. We first see Kidman’s Faunia as she shuts the glass door of the post office in Coleman Silk’s (Anthony Hopkins) face, hiding behind an unruly mop of brown curls as she curtly informs him, “We’re closin’.” As Silk apologetically pushes his way in to pick up some stamps, Faunia observes his hurried actions with a

weary smile, leaning her head against the doorway and adding dryly, “Couldn’t wait ‘til tomorrow, huh?” It is at this point that we see our first full view of Faunia, in a tightly-held medium shot, as she watches Coleman scurry in and out of the post office, and the fundamental contradiction of Kidman-as-Faunia becomes apparent. Although Kidman convincingly evokes Faunia’s deepened, cigarette-ravaged vocal tone, her flat, working-class New England accent, and a nervous demeanour telegraphed, in part, by her furious gum chewing, certain disorienting signifiers of her off-screen glamour are permitted to poke through her frowsy demeanour. The creamy skin and fine features of Nicole Kidman are scarcely concealed under Faunia’s mousy mass of curls, especially when she arches a perfectly-shaped eyebrow at Coleman as he barges into the post office. Baggy brown corduroys and a misshapen grey sweatshirt fail to conceal Kidman’s much-photographed frame, in part because the unzipped sweatshirt falls haphazardly off Faunia’s shoulders, revealing much alabaster skin and a red tank top that accentuates rather than hides the lithe athleticism of her form. Unlike in *The Hours*, Kidman’s thinness is not accentuated in such a way that successfully evokes character; Faunia does not appear gaunt and haggard, as a woman who works three jobs to evade her abusive ex-husband might, but rather as toned and sinewy as the star who plays her.

These visual discontinuities become more troubling the longer we are exposed to Kidman’s Faunia, especially since almost every sequence that follows frames and displays her as the object of Coleman’s gaze. (I point this out, not to analyze Faunia strictly in terms of Mulvey’s influential-yet-contested theory of the controlling male gaze and Faunia’s/Kidman’s passivity or activity within it, but mainly to highlight the eroticising/glamourizing impact — what Mulvey would call ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ — of

the male protagonist's gaze upon its female recipient.)²³ As Coleman pulls up alongside Faunia's broken-down car not long after their encounter at the post office, we see her from Coleman's point of view, framed at first by his rain-streaked car window, languidly leaning against the hood, smoking a cigarette. Again, Faunia's/Kidman's body is foregrounded by the configuration of her wardrobe, as well as the low angle and framing of the shot. Once perched in the passenger seat next to Coleman, the chasm between Kidman's performance and appearance widens further. A chain-smoking Faunia gruffly explains that she lives at the dairy farm, where the "two dykes who run it" give her free board, "in exchange for help with the milkin.'" She reveals that she works as a janitor at the university where Coleman was once dean, sarcastically boasting about the title on her nametag, "Faunia Farley, Custodial Staff." But how to reconcile this crude, embittered talk with the flawlessly made-up visage of the speaker? The tales of hard labour with the delicate hands that allegedly perform it? A subsequent montage of Faunia at work — lugging hay bales with reed-thin arms, mopping a stairwell while perfectly-formed ringlets frame her sweaty brow — further strain credibility rather than easing these apparent contradictions through action.

Kidman's Faunia has moments where she convincingly employs the iconography of culturally-valued performance: the brief moment when a seductive half-smile breaks through Faunia's tough exterior as Coleman fumbles to light the cigarette she's placed between her lips, or her halting pause, letting her head rest momentarily against the car window, when he initially declines her advances, before shrugging it off with a barely-

²³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 28-40.

mumbled “whatever.” But when Coleman climbs the stairwell to Faunia’s room and finds her (as do we, aligned again with Coleman’s point of view) waiting naked on her bed, one can’t help but notice the artful arrangement of Kidman’s arms and legs so that her breasts and pubic area are perfectly concealed. This coyness ultimately seems less evocative of character than it does a star’s desire to be photographed in a certain way. Faunia’s striptease for Coleman later in the film feels similarly contrived. The camera moves over Kidman’s semi-clad body, lit only by candlelight, in short, fluid takes, fragmenting her body so as to emphasize only one graceful body part at a time — her arms as she weaves them elegantly above her head, her back undulating in time to the music, her face as she looks back at Coleman to gage his response.

This tug-of-war between authentic performance and the distraction of Kidman-as-star continues as Faunia progressively reveals her ‘authentic’ inner self. After she initially dodges Coleman’s entreaties to know her better with sullen stares and outright refusal (“Leave it alone. Don’ try to get inside my head”), Faunia hugs her knees to her chest and recounts — in terse, unsympathetic detail — a background of physical and emotional abuse. As the bond between her and Coleman grows, the more Faunia’s inner rage and self-hatred emerges, as evidenced in her twitchy, self-flagellating outburst after prolonging her rendez-vous with Coleman into the next morning, kicking a chair and muttering angrily to herself, “I knew I shouldn’t have stayed... Even whores know that — they don’t pay you to sleep, they pay you to leave.” However, the more of her troubled interiority Faunia reveals, the more we are forced to question Kidman’s believability in ‘living’ her part, which for many viewers, proved highly problematic. Faunia’s tearful breakdown when she reveals to Coleman how her children were killed in a fire was

faulted as Kidman's "career nadir (of) overacting... grasping for an Oscar that remains out of reach,"²⁴ while her lengthy soliloquy to a caged crow was dismissed by one critic as the preening of a star who'd been overindulged by her director.²⁵

As these quotes suggest, the perceived dissonance between star and role, described above, resonated almost universally through the critical reviews of *The Human Stain*. The common refrain in most reviews was that Hopkins (who, we learn, is a black man passing as white) and Kidman were "ludicrously miscast,"²⁶ Kidman's Faunia berated as "a profoundly weak performance from a miscast major star."²⁷ Repeatedly, issues of class and Kidman's undisguised star glamour arose in discussions of Kidman's performance. Rick Groen asserts that, although Kidman's facility in playing "up-class" was well established with *The Hours*, "playing down is clearly beyond the grasp of those delicate hands and the ken of those graceful features."²⁸ Stephen Hunter, in a review tellingly titled 'Out, Out Damn Spotlight,' argues that the notion of the "slim, elegant, beautiful, vulnerable actress" playing the virile, working-class Faunia "sends the movie toppling off into farce and parody."²⁹ Hunter then devotes the opening third of his review to enumerating the various regimes of make-up, lighting, dentistry, and personal training Kidman seemed loathe to relinquish for the sake of character-driven authenticity,

²⁴ Ty Burr, "The Human Stain: 'Stain' misses the mark, despite Hopkins," *The Boston Globe*, 31 October 2003,

<http://www.boston.com/movies/display?display=movie&id=3314>.

²⁵ J. Hoberman, "Telling Lies in America," *The Village Voice*, 29 October 2003, <http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0344/hoberman.php>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Rick Groen, "Ladies play it down," *The Globe and Mail*, 31 October 2003, R1.

²⁸ Ibid., R2.

²⁹ Stephen Hunter, "Out, Out, Damn Spotlight," *The Washington Post*, 31 October 2003, CO1, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&contentId=A44952-2003Oct30¬Found=true>.

ultimately concluding that “(Kidman) seems to think it possible to be both a virile woman and a movie star. The movie tells another story: It's not.”³⁰ Charles Taylor credited the inner dignity that Kidman gave Faunia, but concluded that she “overdoes the working-class stuff. You never forget that this is Nicole Kidman doing an impersonation of a poor, battered woman.”³¹ Thus, Kidman's performance in *The Human Stain* was widely dismissed as a failed attempt at mimicry, ‘true to self’ only insofar as it allowed her off-screen glamour image to intrude, and no longer ‘true to story’ as a result. This demands further exploration in terms of how a role that seemed suited to Kidman's previously-demonstrated skill at transformative authenticity could be so critically vilified after the lavish praise of her work in *The Hours* just six months prior.

On one level, Kidman's Faunia appears caught between Hollywood's antithetical demands for female performer, which praise the artistic merit of transformative acting while insisting that established female stars function as recognisable, glamorous commodities within the majority of their screen roles. Faunia's appearance, constructed and framed as an identifiable derivative of Kidman's-as-glamour image, was widely viewed as an attempt to have it both ways, and thus functions at the expense of truthful characterization. However, the perceived ‘problem’ with Kidman's performance went beyond mere physicality to questions of its emotional veracity.

In this sense, Kidman's Stanislavskian faithfulness to the ‘truth’ of the text may not have been so beneficial to her performance in *The Human Stain* as it was in *The Hours*. As acclaimed as Phillip Roth's novels may be, his female characters have been

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Charles Taylor, “The Human Stain,” *Salon*, 31 October 2003, http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/review/2003/10/31/human_stain/index_np.html.

faulted as one-dimensional male fantasies. Faunia of both novel and screenplay is certainly no exception — an abused yet sexually “ignitable” young woman, who ultimately functions as the narrative device through which Coleman Silk comes to terms with his past. (Faunia dies before she may truly come to terms with her own past.) There is evidence to suggest that Kidman intentionally adhered to the character template laid out by Roth. In researching the role, Kidman went so far as to meet with Roth and discuss how he felt she should ‘perform’ Faunia, right down to the way Faunia might speak or walk. “Phillip Roth gave me my character,” Kidman stated at a press conference for the film in Toronto;³² the unspoken implication being, of course, that Kidman’s authorship of the role was minimal.

However, Kidman’s research also entailed lengthy conversations with domestic abuse victims at women’s shelters, studying behaviour but also attempting to learn the ‘truth’ of their stories. As she revealed to *Premiere* magazine, “Part of me wants to do justice to what I saw in those shelters...I promised these women I would give her dignity. That’s how I approach every character now: Find her heart, find her goodness.”³³ As with *The Hours*, Kidman was committed not just to the work of ‘finding’ her character, but to ‘living’ her character throughout the shoot. The same article describes Kidman on set, remaining ‘Faunia’ even in between takes: “She lights cigarette after cigarette, puffs each once or twice, then violently stubs them out. She carries a running, muttered argument with herself; often she shakes her head, or a shudder runs down her spine.”³⁴

³² Ron Weiskind, “Film Gets Under Skin for Stars Hopkins, Kidman,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 26 October 2003, G8.

³³ Joanna Schneller, “Love Among the Ruins,” *Premiere*, September 2003, 72.

³⁴ Schneller, “Love Among,” 72.

However, despite Kidman's attempts to point to her professional commitment to craft in *The Human Stain*, a self-revelatory discourse that indicates how she 'personalized' the text is notably absent from her discussions of *The Human Stain*. Certainly part of this absence can be attributed to the relatively minimal press Kidman did for the film after a large-scale press conference at the Toronto International Film Festival.³⁵ At the time of the film's premiere, the only magazine cover to feature Kidman was that of *Vogue*, which displayed a Versace-clad, diamond-encrusted Nicole Kidman alongside the words "Fashion's Brightest Star: Nicole Kidman On Life as an Icon."³⁶ In it, a 14-page photo layout of Kidman in a variety of haute couture was accompanied by four-page spread of Kidman's finest fashion moments over the past 15 years, topped off by designer Tom Ford's praise of the "very groomed, very sleek, very controlled" persona she has developed for the red carpet.³⁷ (That such a persona conflicts sharply with the type of rough-edged sensuality and raw emotionality demanded by a character like Faunia goes without saying.) Meanwhile, in contrast to the multitude of in-depth, performance-authenticating interviews Kidman granted in the promotion of *Moulin Rouge*, *The Others*, and *The Hours*, Kidman did little to suggest a personal, emotional connection to the character of Faunia, apart from revealing that she herself had also once cleaned toilets when she worked as an usherette in Sydney.³⁸

³⁵ And it's worth noting here that she was faulted during the festival for strictly controlling her interactions with the media, limiting interviews to a single Q&A session where journalists were given a lengthy list of rules and restrictions beforehand. See Gayle MacDonald, "A tempest in a Kidman teapot," *The Globe and Mail*, 25 September 2003, R1.

³⁶ See Figure 2. *Vogue*, September 2003.

³⁷ Singer, "Master Class," 644.

³⁸ Weiskind, "Film Gets Under Skin."

Interviewers who sought to read *The Human Stain* as a continuation of the emotional catharsis through performance Kidman began in *The Hours* were typically rebuffed with vague responses. "If you ask yourself why, particularly in acting, you can overanalyse yourself, the mystery of it, the mystery of your own psyche."³⁹ Potential connections between Kidman's persona and her character — failed relationships, motherhood, the struggle to survive personal trauma — were largely ignored or denied. Faunia's appeal, Kidman claimed, was not the opportunity for self-revelation she provided, but rather that she was "a wounded woman who believes in people having a right to their secrets and their mysteries."⁴⁰ However, as two key components of Kidman's unsympathetic, pre-divorce persona, 'guardedness' and 'mystery' may not be qualities viewers wish to see her embody on or off screen. Kidman's acclaim as intertextual performer had heretofore depended, to some degree, on her embodiment of a wounded woman who doesn't angrily guard her secrets and anguish, but rather performs them in public for all to see.

Waiting on a ghost: Cultural value and *Cold Mountain*

Cold Mountain came about for me because I needed to do something that was about faith and that was about hope and that was about the belief that if you wait for someone, they will come back. I think if I had gone and done another woman who was very, very dark and damaged ... it wouldn't have boded well for my own life, I don't think. The gift of Ada was very important at that time.⁴¹

³⁹ David Germain, "On a roll: Kidman showcases two heavy dramas at Toronto fest," *Associated Press*, 9 September 2003.

⁴⁰ Karen Butler, "Kidman poised for Oscar encore?" *United Press International*, 28 November 2003.

⁴¹ Kidman in Josh Young, "Love Among the Ruins," *Entertainment Weekly*, 19 December 2003, 34.

As the final strand in a triptych of diverse performances in 2003, Kidman's portrayal of Ada Monroe in *Cold Mountain* provides a valuable culmination of the issues of female star intertextuality, elasticity and culturally-valued acting that have been central to this project. If *The Hours* and *The Human Stain* occupy opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of cultural value, *Cold Mountain* is situated firmly in the middle. Well-reviewed but not exceedingly praised, it features Kidman in a role vastly different from Faunia in *The Human Stain*, but one that is not a complete departure from her recognisable image. Kidman's Ada represents an attempt to achieve the type of balance between performance and persona so troublingly at odds in her portrayal of Faunia. A refined, Civil War-era Southern belle who must learn to fend for herself as she waits for her love to return from the battlefield, Kidman's Ada engages with the qualities of independence, romanticism and noble suffering associated with the most recently-revised version of Kidman's post-divorce persona while mobilizing Kidman's appearance in a somewhat more true-to-story manner than in *The Human Stain*.

As with *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Cold Mountain* transports Kidman's Stanislavskian acting technique to a period setting, her performance as Ada reliant on Kidman's successful evocation of expressive incoherence — specifically, the enactment of Ada's genteel, aristocratic exterior gradually giving way, first to the almost-childish giddiness of first love, and eventually to the earthy resilience of a woman who has learned to survive off the land. Our introduction to Ada almost instantly establishes the outward façade of ornamental beauty, good breeding and manners that have been cultivated in her since birth. Perched ramrod-straight and corset-cinched next to her preacher father (Donald Sutherland) as he drives his buggy into Cold Mountain, her

alabaster skin and fair hair shielded by a sizeable bonnet and veil, Kidman's Ada resembles a misplaced china doll as she approaches the construction site where Inman (Jude Law) is working to offer him a glass of lemonade. Even her proximity to work, and the coarse, sweaty men performing it, seems to make Ada slightly uncomfortable. Kidman periodically averts her eyes from their labours and suppresses an embarrassed smile to convey this, but maintains a perfectly measured, polite tone of speech throughout her conversation with Inman.

In the film's early scenes, proper decorum dictates that Ada's growing infatuation with Inman cannot be expressed plainly through words. Instead, Kidman's Ada must convey her true feelings through fleeting sidelong glances at Inman in church, lowering her gaze bashfully when he comes near or nervously smoothing down the fabric of her dress when he looks away. It is a necessarily limited range of gestures that Ada may use to telegraph her emotions, but one Kidman gets surprising mileage from. Perhaps most effective are the halting conversations where Inman and Ada must rely on the gaps between their words as much as the words themselves in order to convey their true feelings to one another. In one such exchange on her front porch, Ada hesitantly tries to express her distress over the news that he has joined the war effort, a struggle Kidman punctuates with physical movement, taking a step forward with the tray she is carrying as she states, "Someone said you're enlisting," then taking a quick step back again as though she fears his response. When these emotionally-fraught moments culminate in their passionate good-bye kiss as Inman leaves for war, Ada is quite literally brought to her knees, her dignified exterior levelled by the depth of her passion.

Ada's subsequent 'transformation' from sheltered Southern belle to self-sufficient farmer again calls on the tenets of expressive incoherence, no easy feat since this transition is largely condensed into a single sequence played for laughs by Renée Zellweger's Ruby, the industrious drifter sent to help Ada. As Ruby hastily stomps about the farm enumerating the number of changes that must be made in order to make it functional, Ada trails behind her writing down each recommendation, composed at first but increasingly frazzled as she realizes the work that lies ahead of them. The list complete, Ada finally reaches a breaking point as she struggles to help Ruby build a log fence, throwing down the post she is holding and cursing the uselessness of her 'proper' upbringing in an angry, resonant voice decidedly unbecoming of a proper lady: "I can embroider, but I can't darn. I can arrange cut flowers, but I can't grow herbs... If something has a function, it wasn't considered suitable!" Grabbing the end of a fence post with new resolve, Ada shoves it in place and proudly refers to the fence as the first thing she has done that may produce an actual result. Subsequent vignettes of Ada wielding an axe, tending the garden and milking cows all foreground, to varying degrees, her complete physical and emotional absorption in the task at hand, underscored by certain look of almost-defiant pride on her face. It is only in Ada's quieter moments, reading *Wuthering Heights* to Ruby, or penning tear-stained letters to Inman, that her yearning and vulnerability are allowed to show through; however, Kidman's performance suggests that this yearning only fuels her resolve to keep working, rather than undermining it.

Unlike *The Human Stain*, critical reviews of *Cold Mountain* consistently praised Kidman's emotional veracity as Ada, and her embodiment of "the right combination of

girlishness and inner strength... first to attract Inman but then to survive his departure and confront her hopelessly inadequate preparation for the exigencies of war.”⁴²

However, a conflicted tone is apparent in many reviews, praising Kidman’s acting on one hand but faulting the excessive glamour of her appearance on the other. For example, although Kidman’s Ada conveys “the yearning and hopes of a young woman waiting for her soldier to return from an increasingly senseless war,” she “is allowed to look entirely too glamorous for the period and her character’s dire situation.”⁴³ Or, as David Ansen puts it, although Kidman “deftly captures both Ada’s diffidence and her determination... one wish(es) she didn’t always look fresh out of the beauty parlour.”⁴⁴

Certainly the character of Ada Monroe utilizes the recognisable star beauty of Nicole Kidman. Ada is described in Charles Frazier’s novel as so beautiful that the very thought of her made Inman’s cheeks hurt, and in an epic film adaptation rendered in the romantic spirit of Old Hollywood, one can hardly imagine a dirt-encrusted, stringy-haired Ada greeting Inman at the end of his journey. Several reviews point out that the fact that the heightened radiance of Kidman’s Ada coincides with her ‘transformation’ into an independent, self-sufficient woman, and thus functions as a physical manifestation of her inner growth. As Stephen Hunter, one of the most savage critics of Kidman’s work in *The Human Stain*, asserts

People this gifted by their genetic mandates frequently just pose their way through life, but both Law and Kidman think hard about character and are

⁴² Edward Buscombe, “The Homecoming,” *Sight and Sound*, February 2004, http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/2004_02/coldmountain.php.

⁴³ Kirk Honeycutt, “Cold Mountain,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 21 December 2003, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/reviews/review_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=2047030.

⁴⁴ David Ansen, “Epic Proportions,” *Newsweek*, 13 December 2003, 58.

willing to give up on being beautiful to be real. And of course, that's the magic of movies: The more real they are, the more beautiful they seem.⁴⁵

This rationale can be applied to certain sequences wherein Kidman/Ada's appearance takes centre stage. For example, Ada's pink-cheeked prettiness during a Christmas Eve dance with her newly-adopted family implies she is thriving despite the harsh backdrop of the war, while in the film's final scene, Ada's calm radiance provides a reassuring counterpoint as she skins a dead lamb and shows her daughter how to place its skin over the back of an orphan so it will be adopted. Ada's strength, in these scenes, is expressed through her beauty and grace in potentially grim circumstances. Other moments, meanwhile, do allow Kidman's star glamour to function in excess as it did in *The Human Stain*. Particularly troubling is a prolonged sex scene — what should be the passionate reunion of two young lovers — shot in the same fragmented, candlelit close-ups as Faunia's striptease. Kidman's/Ada's body is at once distractingly foregrounded and selectively displayed, its decidedly contemporary shape peeking out from an amazingly well-kempt head of cascading blonde curls. However, despite the inconsistency with which Kidman's/Ada's appearance was suitably integrated into the 'reality' of her character, her performance as a whole was faulted but not vilified for these perceived slippages, as it was in *The Human Stain*.⁴⁶

As the quote that opened this section suggests, Kidman's careful management of her off-screen persona in relation to her screen performance as Ada — largely absent/unsuccessful in the press she did for *The Human Stain* — remained crucial to the

⁴⁵ Stephen Hunter, "Southern Odyssey," *Washington Post*, 25 December 2003, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&contentId=A29249-2003Dec24¬Found=true>.

⁴⁶ Kidman received a Golden Globe nomination for her role in *Cold Mountain*, and was considered a surprise omission from the Academy Award nominations for best actress.

media that surrounded *Cold Mountain*, albeit in a less direct, ‘confessional’ fashion than had characterized her previous successes. Ada’s hope and faith are appropriated by Kidman as key components of her own character at the time, emerging from the personal ‘dark’ place so closely associated with her previous characters. However, although Kidman admitted that she drew on her experience of falling in love with Cruise in just a few days to convincingly portray Ada’s whirlwind romance with Inman, inquiries about her present-day private life were swiftly rebuffed. The following responses were typical:

I could not survive again what I did before, I know I couldn’t. I cannot have another relationship that becomes public property. I’m not a controlling person, but this is something I have to control for my own health and well-being and for my family.⁴⁷

I don’t think I will ever put myself up for scrutiny, in terms of a personal relationship, ever again... It’s too delicate, too ephemeral, too painful when it fails. So to have it on display terrifies me.⁴⁸

Interestingly, these ‘evasions’ ultimately reveal as much as they conceal.

Kidman’s established romanticism, as performed in the media, has become tempered by the same type of thorny resilience that Ada must adopt as she waits across the years for her ‘ghost’ to return. (“All this while, I’ve been packing ice around my heart,” Ada confesses to Inman upon their reunion. “How do I make it melt?”) To survive, Kidman, like Ada, must be protective of herself and her loved ones — underneath her smooth, glamorous exterior, after all, is a fragile heart that loves with near life-threatening intensity, and therefore must be concealed, or revealed only with extreme care. In the absence of love, work takes priority; hence Kidman’s deflection of personal questions by

⁴⁷ Terry Lawson, “Kidman’s stock at an all-time high,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, 10 January, 2004, J6

⁴⁸ Christopher Bagley, “Nicole: Turning real-world torments into on-screen triumphs is all in a day’s work,” *W*, December 2003, 274.

suggesting that her work is her true love at present, validating her efforts with the admission that the passion she once invested in her marriage she now gives to her performances.⁴⁹ A new Kidman identity is thus born and performed in relation to a new character, suggesting that, although the outcome is never guaranteed, constant re-negotiation and management are essential to her ongoing relevance-as-performer. Since *Cold Mountain's* release, this persona has since been re-activated (and slightly re-worked) in connection with Kidman's role in *The Stepford Wives*, the growing distance between Kidman and her flawless celebrity wife image consistently re-iterated by Kidman's revelation that she now feels incapable of balancing marriage and a career.⁵⁰

Of course, a case could be made that Kidman, as intertextual performer forced to manage an 'elastic' persona over the course of her career, still occupies a marginalized position insofar as her perceived cultural value hinges on such a complex nexus of intersecting 'performances,' filtered, distilled and altered through media outlets and film forms beyond her control. However, I'd like to suggest that Kidman's model still signifies a compelling and arguably progressive one for the contemporary female star; after all, in foregrounding issues of skilled performance both on-screen and off, Kidman's career narrative suggests a progression — from passivity to activity, from glamour image to artist — that is as hopeful as it is tenuous.

⁴⁹ See Smith, "Walking Tall;" Young, "Love Among."

⁵⁰ See, for example, "Nicole Kidman: I'm Sooo Not Perfect," *Star*, 21 June 2004, 46-47.

Conclusion

Ways of performing in film represent and embody not only a culture's beliefs about personal identity but also the ways in which any culture will conceptualize the legitimate professional identities of stars and other film performers.¹

I feel the need to practice my profession — acting is not a choice anymore. I need creativity in my life. I'm willing to expose myself and give, like, blood, which I know sounds extreme. But there's an intensity to the passion I now feel for my work.²

Kidman is not the first star to play down her beauty for a role, but her bold choices have set a new bar for Hollywood actresses.³

If the term 'star' has lost a degree of its lustre within the contemporary cultural climate, an increased emphasis on performance provides one viable avenue whereby the film star may continue to shine. As this study has shown through close scrutiny of the career narrative of Nicole Kidman, the exacting demands of culturally-valued acting render this avenue treacherous, but by no means impossible, for the female star to negotiate. As an always-shifting figure who must constantly re-negotiate the terms of her representation across an ever-widening range of discourses, Kidman's model of stardom indicates the renewed importance of analyzing female films stars as intertextual entities shaped by both screen and media performances.

As Alan Lovell quite rightly argues, a greater understanding of the mechanics, demands and skills involved in star performance is needed in order to make

¹ Paul McDonald, "Reconceptualising Stardom," 182.

² Kidman quoted in Ruthe Stein, "Kidman gives 'blood' for her roles," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 23 March 2003, O2.

³ Belinda Luscombe, "Nicole Kidman: Acting's Adventurer," in *Time* 100, *Time*, 26 April 2004, 82. Kidman was named by *Time* as one of the world's 100 most influential people, the only actor besides Sean Penn to achieve the status of artists who "have explored new territory, set new standards — and made the world an immeasurably richer place for all of us."

contemporary star studies more intellectually secure.⁴ However, as Kidman's case study has shown, star studies must also strive for a greater understanding of how these mechanics, demands, and skills can uniquely affect the production and reception of female star performance. The expectation that female stars should function primarily as static, glamourized spectacle both on-screen and in the media runs counter to the expectation that culturally-valued actors should function as physically and emotionally 'active' creators of meaning through performance. It has therefore been necessary to acknowledge how the formative influences of what is currently viewed as 'quality' acting — Strasberg's adaptation of Stanislavski's teachings into The Method, as well as a renewed emphasis on transformative, true-to-story characterization — can function to marginalize the female star.

Certainly Kidman's career narrative engages meaningfully with this fact. Close performance analysis of Kidman's films reveals a layered acting style that utilizes, to varying degrees, the visible and audible signs of Method-influenced 'authenticity,' most notably through the enactment of conflict between a cool, controlled exterior and an emotionally 'genuine' interiority, but also via meaningful silences, hesitant or inarticulate speech, and expressive gestures. Physical and vocal transformation has also defined Kidman's screen roles to an exceedingly high degree,⁵ especially for such an iconic and glamorous female star. However, given the wildly variant critical reception of each of the performances discussed herein, often without explanations that can be linked overtly

⁴ Lovell, "I Went Looking," in Austin and Barker, *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, 268.

⁵ It is worth noting that all of Kidman's Hollywood film roles besides *Days of Thunder* have necessitated, at very least, some form of vocal transformation (usually in the form of an American or British accent) due to Kidman's Australian accent.

to the apparent quality or technique of the acting displayed in the films themselves, it becomes necessary to look beyond the film text. In Kidman's case, the performance context provided by the celebrity media discourses surrounding her films appears crucially intertwined with the perceived 'worth' of her screen roles.

In analyzing screen acting and star media texts for the most part as separate entities, star studies has largely overlooked the crucial contemporary relationship between these two types of discourses. While definitive screen performances remain the primary source of artistic credibility for the film star, the relative infrequency of film roles in comparison with star-media interactions has prompted a growing emphasis on star biography and media 'performance'—once perceived as a purely passive, feminized realm of gossip and glamour images—as a source of meaning. A female star such as Kidman may therefore utilize media interest in her to the advantage of her cultural status. Since the Stanislavskian and Method-derived principles of culturally-valued acting demand a certain degree of self-revelation across a variety of psychologically-rich roles, interviews can at once provide the female star an invaluable forum for revealing the type of personal depth and 'inner' emotionality essential to such screen roles while still permitting a comfortable distance between star and role wherein the star's mastery of craft in 'becoming' her character may be discussed. While it has been argued that male Method actors may legitimate their on-screen psychological intensity through inarticulacy or silence during interviews,⁶ Kidman's example suggests that a more personal, confessional discourse is required of the female star who attempts

⁶ See Greg M. Smith, "Choosing Silence: Robert DeNiro and the Celebrity Interview," *Stars in Our Eyes*, in Ndalians and Henry, 44-58.

transformative authenticity. A detailed, comparative study of the media interactions of contemporary male and female stars in relation to transformatively authentic performances would provide valuable insight into how media-based performance signs may also be differentiated along gender lines.

Achieving this delicate balance between personal proximity to and creative distance from the role in question necessitates an accomplished performance across an expansive range of media outlets; however, Kidman's example suggests that the female star's greatest challenge may lie in re-working her media persona to achieve the same balance with each, vastly different role assumed thereafter. Ultimately, Kidman's productivity-as-performer may prove the greatest challenge to her ongoing management of persona and performance. With no fewer than seven films slated for release by the end of 2005, featuring performances that run the gamut from serious drama to high comedy to musical, Nicole Kidman's career narrative will no doubt continue to engage and challenge conventional notions of female star performance.⁷ Comedies like *The Stepford Wives* (Frank Oz, 2004) and the upcoming *Bewitched* (Nora Ephron, 2005) and musicals such as *The Producers* (Susan Stroman, 2005) may showcase a different set of performance skills than those on display in purely dramatic roles, but each contributes to wider perceptions of her star image and overall worth-as-performer. Each success and each failure will be equally instructive.

This leads to the bigger question, then, of whether Kidman's model of stardom — as intertextual performer managing an 'elastic' persona — can be considered an empowering or constraining one for the female star. Certainly a case can be made against

⁷ Kidman's upcoming slate of films can be accessed on the *Internet Movie Database* at <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000173/>.

its volatility and instability, especially given the mixed critical reception of Kidman's film performances. However, I'd like to suggest that in drawing on the tenets of transformative authenticity, Kidman's performance style at very least succeeds in challenging the notion of female star as pure spectacle. Whether she disavows spectacle entirely to function as site of performance (as in *The Hours*), or blends spectacle with performance in such a way that de-familiarizes the former with the achievement of the latter (as in *Moulin Rouge* and *The Others*), or even enacts a battle to reconcile the two (as in *The Human Stain* and *Cold Mountain*), Kidman's acting elucidates the struggle between opportunity and limitation that currently defines the contemporary female star.

It could also be argued that this intertextual model renders the female star dependent on precisely the type of trivializing celebrity discourse she is striving to escape through her skill as an actor. However, I'd like to suggest that, in pointing viewers and critics alike to her work-as-actor through both personal and professional revelation in the celebrity media, Kidman not only draws attention to her considerable screen acting skills, but also reverses the typically-passive notion of celebrity discourse to suggest the possibility of female star as active creator of meaning, rather than passive recipient of it. If both films and the 'being-in-public' of the star are treated as types of performance, there is the potential to see their skilled rendering and careful management — both individually, and in relation to one another — as a culturally-valued craft unto itself.

Figure 1: From “The Power of the Red Carpet,” *Vogue*, March 2003, 472. Photo taken prior to the March 1997 Oscar ceremony.

Figure 2: The September 2003 cover of *Vogue*.

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