

The star as a Creation and the Star as a creator: The Case of Barbra Streisand

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The well-known saying that movie stars are their own greatest invention is attributed to Greta Garbo, who became known by the moniker “The Divine”, following a silent movie in 1928.

In the years known as the Classical Hollywood Era, the great movie stars, female stars in particular, were able to gain control of their central creation –i.e. their own narrative as movie stars – only by way of negation. They declined, as much as they were able to, projects that did not match the self-concept they were attempting to produce (subject to their contracts with the studios). Garbo herself succeeded in achieving real control over her legend only through absolute and total negation: a complete and early retirement from the movie world.

An exception to this rule is the case of movie directors who also participate in their own films as actors, and are thus able to gain active control of their movie star identities. Most famous among these is Charles Chaplin, whom we may consider the first great cinema movie star. Another well-known example of another comedian from a later period is Woody Allen – who is very careful to perform as an actor in most of his films and works, doing it alongside the Hollywood machinery and not in its center. A third, highly popular way, particularly since the beginning of the eighties, is that of movie stars changing course to directing films. At a later stage this will enable cinema “heroes” to step into the shaping of their own myth.

Unlike popular journalism, academic research has tended so far to underrate the phenomenon of movie-star directors and regarded it as proof of the stars’ ability to enforce the fulfillment of their personal idiosyncrasies (within budgetary limits) on the producers.

When Martin Barker summed up the state of the research on all subjects related to “Contemporary Hollywood Stardom” he dismissed that trend as temporary and negligible, quoting from the Guardian:

“... Such ‘vanity deals’, as they became contemptuously known, allowed various stars to create their own production companies. Some have been pretty successful – Clint Eastwood is a good example. Many have been disastrous flops, and if the runes are right, their days are numbered.”¹

However, a closer scrutiny of movie stars who became creative artists, i.e. directed or produced their own films reveals that the phenomenon is not marginal. Movie stars’ control of the production mechanism of the commercial American film industry has been gaining strength since the middle of the seventies. This fact is supported by a succession of movie stars who won the American Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Director.

Some of the prominent star directors include Robert Redford (*Ordinary People*, 1980), Warren Beatty (*Reds*, 1981), Barbra Streisand (*Yentl*, 1983), Kevin Costner (*Dances With Wolves*, 1990), Clint Eastwood (*Unforgiven*, 1992) and Mel Gibson (*Braveheart*, 1995). They all, except Streisand, received the Best Director Oscar Award for directing their own films. In fact, from 1980 to 1995, out of fifteen Oscar Awards given to the best directors of the year, seven were awarded to actors. One may also add Sir Richard Attenborough who received the Oscar for directing *Ghandi* (1982) to the group listed above and Sidney Pollack who won the Oscar for directing *Out of Africa* (1985).

Nowadays it is difficult to find a star whose credit list does not include a Producer title at the very least and a distinct correlation can be traced between the stability and continuity of a star's specific cinema career and the extent he or she controls its production mechanisms.

As far as women in the American Movie are concerned, the ability to conceive of female stars as creative artists is a crucial one. During most of the twentieth century women were limited only to acting in the commercial American film industry and rarely performed in other key roles, as directing and producing. Still, some of the successful female stars in popular American cinematography managed to formulate and even gain control of the cinematic texts in which they acted and moved. One of Andrew Britton's important conclusions, for example, in his research of Katherine Hepburn, *The Star as Feminist*², is that Hepburn's performance is always more radical than the narrative of her films, a conclusion that can also be applied to Streisand in her early films, before she became fully proficient in controlling the mechanism of movie production in the films she participated in as an actress.

In the beginning of the 1970's, the American film industry began to hold directors in an ever-growing esteem never before seen in the USA. More and more films were premiered under the title *Directed by* or *A "so and so's" film*. A new generation of directors, working on the hub of Hollywood's industry, obtained unprecedented control of their movies: John Schlesinger, Peter Bogdanovich, Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Robert Altman, Paul Mazursky, Hal Ashby, Milos Forman and Sidney Pollack – all became household names and the great stars of their films.

These directors dared to produce movies without stars, something previously unheard of in the American movie industry. In fact, they brought forth a new generation of stars: Peter Fonda, Jack Nicholson, Clint Eastwood, Dustin Hoffman, Harvey Keitel, Robert de Niro, Robert Redford, Al Pacino ...

These directors had a common denominator; they were all men who were making personal movies - as much as a Hollywood movie can be personal - from their own point of view. The common denominator of all the new film stars was that they too were all men.

Streisand was basically the last product issued by the studio system. When Paul Monaco writes about "The twilight of the goddesses: Hollywood Actresses in the 1960s"³ he enumerates a list of the greatest female stars of the decade, from Marilyn Monroe (as the first) to Barbra Streisand (the last), stating that although Streisand had played in only two films in the sixties –

she had established herself by the end of the 1960's as Hollywood's most important female screen discovery of the decade⁴

The era of the directors as stars in Hollywood lasted only few years. The success of the first "blockbusters", of *Jaws* (1975) by Steven Spielberg, which grossed 129.5 million dollars, a sum close to the profits of the rest of the most successful films in that year⁵ put together, and of *Star Wars*, which grossed the incredible amount of 775.4 million dollars a year later⁶, a sum unheard of in those days, raised the financial risks involved in producing new films to such a level that the studios were reluctant to undertake such projects without substantial guarantees of success.

This new trend had two outcomes: the first was the production of movie sequels and the use of already proven popular narrative formulae; the second was the rise of the stars as auteurs.

In an era when the industry was dominated by mega productions for young audiences, an urgent need arose for an additional channel that would create the showcase films also needed by the industry. The American Cinema Academy could not award the Oscar for Best Film to *Indiana Jones 3* or *Batman 2* despite their success. It was the stars – directors or actors – who made possible the production of the "important" films of the industry. Not only were their names sufficient, at the very least, to guarantee the primary public relations required for a new film to succeed, but the private narrative attached to their persona had also already proved itself suitable for the emotional and ideological needs of potential viewers.

In this historical development of the increasing influence of the stars there emerged a doubly opportune message, from the female perspective, for female movie stars, both stars and auteurs. For them, moving to production and directing was a matter of to be or not to be.

In the 1970's Streisand stood in glorious isolation on the narrow peak of the American Film world, the only female film star whose films came up regularly on the ten top list of the highest grossing films of the year. In an interview for the New York Times Magazine, in 1974, Robert Evans, who was the production manager of Paramount Pictures at the time, maintained that:

Writers know that if they're going to write something on spec, there are ten male stars and one woman they can put the picture together with.⁷

And they did not even try.

In an era where in fact there were no opportunities for female stars in Hollywood whatsoever⁸, Streisand took advantage of the power stardom provided her and gained control of her films. She was not the first woman to direct a movie in Hollywood – there had been women directors in the industry already during the silent movie period. Nor was she the first woman to have used her star power to control her films – Mary Pickford had produced most of her films by herself. But throughout the years none of them had managed to reach Streisand's achievement – directing successful high-budget films on the hub of the action in Hollywood.

Barbara Streisand, born in 1942, was almost fifty years old when *The Prince of Tides* came out in 1991. She was fifty-four when *The Mirror has Two Faces*, the first non comic film (though it was placed in the romantic comedy category) keeping happy end for Barbara, as a romantic figure, came on the screens in 1996. Streisand, though she was of such a mature age (by the industry standards) was cast in these roles because she was both the producer and the director of those films.

Although Streisand's development as an independent creator has been gradual, taking place only after her cultural and cinematic image had already been determined by others in films such as *Funny Girl*, *What's Up Doc*, and *The Way We Were*, nevertheless her commitment to designing her cinematic image is absolute. She has never directed or produced a film that did not reserve the major part for herself and actively bond with her earlier cinematic heritage. It might definitely be claimed that Barbra Streisand's "stardom" is a central theme and The Central Theme of her auteurship as a filmmaker. Any attempt, therefore, to separate the discussion of her work as a film director from the discussion of the meanings and implications of her out-of-the-ordinary cinematic persona will be an artificial one.

A prominent characteristic of Streisand's films is their marked, demonstrated awareness of the tension between the character played by the star and the star herself as a character. In this sense Streisand is not much different from Greta Garbo⁹, although as previously noted, this is much more active and therefore arouses spontaneous antagonism in those who find it hard to accept such an extreme measure of feminine control, on the screen and behind it. In her book, *From Reverence to Rape*, Molly Haskell writes that the tremendous antagonism of the Hollywood establishment to *Yentl* (1983), even after it had proved to be a box office hit and a critic success was not in what she called

The chutzpah for doing what had only added to Warren Beatty's renaissance credentials.

She explains that

The real arrogance of *Yentl* was not in Streisand's assuming the directorial reins, but in imposing her torchy star persona on an otherwise absorbing feminist fable.¹⁰

Streisand herself said that the theme of the movie was the attempt of a woman to direct a film in Hollywood.

Strangely enough, even till the present time, Streisand has not been accepted as an auteuress, not least because of her position as a star. In his book *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond* R.Wood enumerates a list of fourteen women who tried to direct films in the United States during the seventies and eighties, posing the question:

One may ask why no woman (Streisand the partial exception) has ever made a really big-grossing box office hit. Treating the possible sexist response with the contempt it deserves, one may suggest that one reason is that no woman (Streisand again excepted) has been entrusted with the kind of material from which box office hits are made.¹¹

Still, Streisand too was not "entrusted" with such material. *Yentl*, the first movie she autored as a director, contained enough "problematic" material, by box-office standards, to undermine the success of three films at least: it took place in a Jewish religious and ethnic environment without any connection to politics or to the holocaust (a context presenting Jews as victims entitled as such to sympathy); it dealt with blurring gender identities without using humor; it also was a Musical, at a time when the genre had actually ceased to exist. The main reason for the film turning into a success was also the one that eventually drew most of the fire to it; it was Streisand's own stardom. Despite all of the above, Wood denies the feministic significance of the film and describes it as an offshoot of her stardom:

It is scarcely a breakthrough for women directors, as its existence is entirely dependent on Streisand's status as Superstar¹²

From a feministic point of view, stardom was the only door a woman could open in the end of the seventies, not only by capitalistic considerations (for what other female director could obtain a budget for a large film at that time?), but also in terms of contents.

The explosive ideological material of *Yentl*, in queer and feministic contexts, was accepted only because Streisand was the one carrying it. In other words, the issues introduced by the film could make their appearance for the twofold reason that they had already been presented in her narrative as a star and as such, they had already proved prior to the production of the film that they were relevant to the public and could be accepted by it.

Despite the power attributed to Streisand in the American Showbiz she was compelled to cope with essential dictates; dictates of production, unwritten rules of the genres in which her protagonist moved, her own cinematic history and the expectations of the audience. Since essentially her work addresses a large audience and aspires by definition to be recognized by the establishment, both of them – the audience and the film establishment – have a great share in her central decisions for her films. The way a film is accepted, or rejected, will have a direct effect on the production mechanism and the narrative of her next film. One of her favorite statements maintains that:

The people, the public, whom I believe in, are the greatest barometer of the truth. And they know; they know what's truthful and what's false.¹³

All the same, Streisand is still the most radical female star, in queer and feministic terms, to have emerged in Hollywood since the beginning of the seventies. She has always endeavored in her work to break through her boundaries as a woman, both in respect of her controlling the production mechanisms of her films as well as of their narratives. The ideological subversion of her movies became more and more specific as her control of her movie production mechanism grew tighter and she could thus reach the ideological limit zone, of the industry and the audience. No other star in the past four decades had come close to that borderline.

In her films, the subversive presentation of male and female identities and the power relationships between them, in the frame of heterosexual relationships, affect the emotional response of the audience directly even if it may not always reach their levels of critical discourse and conscious awareness, because of the camouflage afforded by conservative plot structures.

If, as Laura Mulvey claims in her breakthrough article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), the mainstream movie addresses mostly the male, heterosexual viewer, seeking to please his gaze, then Streisand's cinematography is unique, not only because its production components have become increasingly controlled by a woman as her career progressed, but also by addressing, first and foremost, consciously or subconsciously, all members of the audience who are not that "heterosexual male viewer" Mulvey is writing about. It aims at blurring the distinctions between male and female exactly as Mulvey recommends in her follow up article from 1985. This is substantiated by heterosexual and homosexual male reactions to Streisand's work, generally speaking of course, which are completely polarized in states of fear and recoil vis-à-vis admiration and attraction, while the attitude of female viewers to her is conveyed from an altogether different perspective of identification.

Streisand's particular case suggests the possibility that the subversive deconstruction of existing cinematic structures and the encouragement of female creativity within the existing commercial industry, despite its male dominance and the many compromises it entails, might become more efficient by rejecting commercial film making completely and turning to the fringes of the industry. Such a solution is in fact a non-solution, since it is essentially a narrow creative and critical circle addressing savants and specialized groups, but not reaching the wider audiences who unavoidably remain voiceless.

Notes

¹ Barker in Austin & Barker, 2003, pp. 10-11, citing, 'You're so Vain', *Guardian*, 22-8 July 2000:9-10.

² Britton, 1984.

³ Monaco, p.120.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 138.

⁵ One may use as a comparison the second part of *The Godfather*, which was a huge success only the year prior to that, and had made "only" a little over thirty million dollars.

⁶ These sums represent profits only in the USA. They are taken from Tom Shone's *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer* (2004, pp.17-43).

⁷ in Swenson, 1986, p. 128.

⁸ So far, the number of female motion picture directors in Hollywood is particularly low, even in comparison with female ratio in other desirable professions. As of the end of 2001 the ratio of female directors in the total number of directors in the American

Film Industry was 6%, (Campbell, Haaretz, 03.09.02). The first American female director who was nominated for Oscar in the Director category was Sofia Coppola in 2004.

⁹ Pauline Kael, the most influential film critic of her time, wrote of Streisand's sixth film performance in *Up in the Sandbox*, which was not a commercial success, that

"...She's a complete reason for going to a movie, as Garbo was"

The New Yorker, December 30, 1972.

¹⁰ Haskell, (1973) 1987, p.375.

¹¹ Wood, 2003, p. 186.

¹² Wood, p. 187.

¹³ in *Coupe Ter Welden*, Dutch TV, 4/2/84.

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