



Deglamming as Estrangement: Ugly in *Monster*, *The Hours*, and *Cake*

Sharrona Pearl, Drexel University, shp72@drexel.edu

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore female actresses undergoing radical or seemingly radical physical transformation in service of a broader kind of career transformation. I problematize the simple calculation of deglamming, thinking more closely about the ways that celebrity structure raises challenges to actors and especially actresses attempting to engage with against-type characters. I turn specifically to three well-known examples of this trend: Charlize Theron in *Monster* (2003), Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* (2002), and Jennifer Aniston in *Cake* (2014). I argue that the process we see is not about deglamming (or getting ugly) for its own sake. Deglamming in these cases is a process of estrangement: from beauty, from the celebrity machine, from audience expectations. I draw on screen shots, film reviews and interviews to explore the relationship between deglamming and estrangement as a kind of acting and character technique, paying particular attention to the stakes for presenting historical characters in biopics. And while the three films I examine here – *Monster*, *The Hours*, and *Cake* – are often thought together as examples of actress Oscar uglification, they are actually quite different, both in terms of the physical transformations the actresses underwent in service of their characters, and the ways in which these transformations were understood and received.

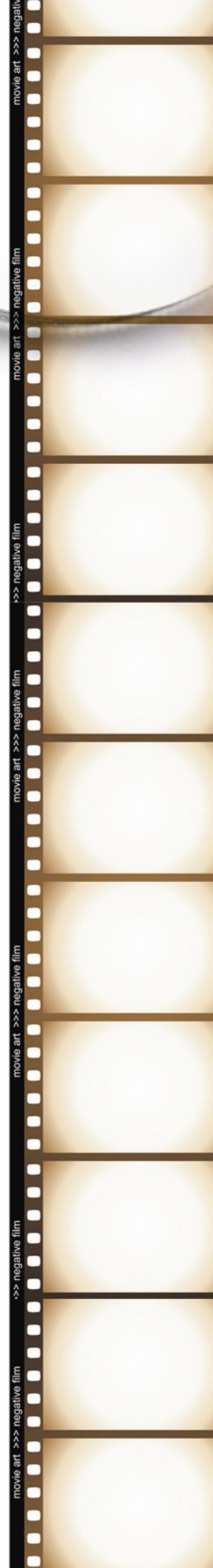
Keywords: deglamming, celebrity, estrangement, film studies, gender studies, the face



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Deglamming as Estrangement: Ugly in *Monster*, *The Hours*, and *Cake* Sharrona Pearl

Introduction

It even has a name: deglamming. But it's also called, variously: "Oscar bait," or, simply, "pretty women playing ugly," (or normal, maybe – maybe implying that normal is ugly? Which, in the glamorous and unrealistic and assisted world of Hollywood, maybe it is.)

It's almost a trope, at this point: famous starlet seeks to be taken seriously by The Academy and by the profession at large. She has enough pull and enough following to find a Serious Role (and if she doesn't, she may have enough money to produce it herself.) And she takes on that serious role and transforms herself into a Serious Actress. And to get from a (starlet) to b (serious actor), is not simply a matter of taking on the role and doing it well. Or, to put it another way: doing it well means, apparently, doing it ugly. Serious Roles for Serious Actors are not glamorous. They are not beautiful. They involve intense commitment and bravery and personal transformation. They involve becoming ugly.

Maybe.

In this paper, I explore the trend, or trope, or historical trajectory of female actresses undergoing radical or seemingly radical physical transformation in service of a broader kind of career transformation. I problematize the simple calculation of deglamming, thinking more closely about the ways that celebrity structure raises certain challenges to actors and especially

actresses attempting to engage with certain kinds of characters. I turn specifically to three well-known examples of this trend: Charlize Theron in *Monster* (2003), Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* (2002), and Jennifer Aniston in *Cake* (2014). (It's worth noting that the first two did indeed win a slew of awards – including the Oscar) for their portrayals, and that Aniston was nominated for a Golden Globe (she lost) and sparked a lot of controversy for being blanked by the Academy nominations.

I'm going to argue that the process we see is not about deglamming (or getting ugly) for its own sake. (Beauty sells, right? And generally, attractive people get more (Hamermesch, 2011).) But for these three actresses in particular, and indeed for celebrity characters in general, the beauty and its associated persona inhibits the actors' ability to inhabit a role, or, more properly, to be seen as inhabiting a role. Audiences see the persona of Charlize Theron; they can't distance from that. For Charlize Theron to be a poor, mentally ill serial killer, for the audience to believe Charlize Theron in the role of a poor, mentally ill serial killer, she needs to distance herself – and us – from her star persona, which also means distancing herself from her beauty. She needs to make herself strange. Deglamming, then, is a process of estrangement: from beauty, from the celebrity machine, from audience expectations. It's not simply a cynical Oscar bid: it's an act of rebellion.

I don't mean this in the clichéd and oft-repeated (as we'll see) film critic narrative that deglamming actors are being "brave" by going ugly. I suppose there is a risk, of sorts, of creating distance from a highly successful brand package, especially if it goes wrong. But in the cases I explore, the actors were deeply involved in every aspect of their performance and production, partly because there was not a lot of commercial support for these roles – because beauty sells, right?

I draw on screen shots, reviews and interviews to explore the relationship between deglamming and estrangement as a kind of acting and character technique. In the larger project I turn to some historical examples of actresses rebranding (to be a bit anachronistic) or redefining themselves visually and physically in order to transition to different kinds of roles and think through the connections between these processes. And while the three films I examine here – *Monster*, *The Hours*, and *Cake* – are often thought together as examples of actress Oscar uglification, they are actually quite different, both in terms of the physical transformations the actresses underwent, and the ways in which these transformations were understood and received.

Historical context

Despite the relatively recent timeframe of these three films, this is not a new phenomenon. The debates around imitation versus historical realism have long roots in acting theory, as film critic James Naremore (2012) analyses in detail. He argues that for iconic stars, the task can be

more difficult: their use of repeated gestures to express the same emotion (Bogart's communication of bravado by hooking his thumb into his pants across different films) makes them instantly recognizable. Actors who are unknown to audiences have an easier job, especially in biopics: the audience doesn't already know the actor's "self" (p. 42). By the same token, I show, when well-known actors such as Charlize Theron or Nicole Kidman successfully pull it off, it is all the more impressive. Part of Jennifer Aniston's challenge in *Cake* was that she wasn't trying to be a known other figure. It simply wasn't as hard, and she never quite transformed.

Kevin Esch (2006) traces debates around bodily transformation to earlier instantiations of method acting, showing that immersion in a role can be considered the ultimate in actorly dedication. Weight fluctuation, he shows, is strongly indexed to award nomination; from this he concludes that the Academy values method acting as the most serious and accolade-worthy manifestation of the profession (p. 98). But only in a very limited way: bodily changes must be confined only to the screen and in service of character. Marlon Brando's personal weight fluctuation is bad (p. 102); as we have seen recently, Renée Zellweger's new face is unacceptable. He traces the triumphing of bodily transformation to the revival of Method acting in 1950s Hollywood as a way to attract younger audiences through the ethos of rebellion and

outsider status that method actors seemed to embody (p. 100). Esch problematizes this history, however, showing how other theorists view bodily manipulation as a kind of trick or spectacle that elides skill through spectacle; a change in the body does not obviously communicate a change in character. In fact, extreme immersion in the role was often critiqued as an indulgence. In Laurence Oliver’s famous turn of phrase to Dustin Hoffman after Hoffman stayed up all night to best communicate his character’s insomnia, “Why don’t you try acting, dear boy?” (p. 97)

How it looks on screen

But now: the images (see Figures 1-3).



Figure 1. Aileen Wuornos/Charlize Theron in *Monster*/Charlize Theron comparison. Aileen Wuornos Charlize Theron side by side [Online image]. (nd). Retrieved from http://luxus.welt.de/sites/default/files/styles/giant-teaser/public/img/07_monster.jpg

I didn’t have to make these: the before-and-after shot is almost as common as the references to the transition in the reviews. And it’s not just curiosity, I think – there’s a real appreciation (in

some of the reviews) for the transformation that has been wrought. There's a respect for both the possibilities of visual change in and of itself, and for the ways that these actresses succeeded in becoming almost unrecognizable. And, of course, that's the key phrase for my argument: almost unrecognizable. Because recognition of, say, Charlize Theron is recognition of all that comes with being Charlize Theron. Which interferes, or at least can interfere, with what it means to be Aileen Wuornos.

The transformations

While in many ways the transformation of Theron is the most dramatic, it is also the least prosthetic. Theron gained weight (which is a complicated and interestingly gendered discussion) and she treated her hair (more?), but all she did to her face was add a mouthpiece to her teeth and put on makeup to create this complexion. She looks totally, totally different. It's powerful. And, as we'll see, it's even more powerful – by far – when you see her in action. Her gestures and bodily movement completely transplant the viewer into the world and mind of the character. The facial and bodily manipulation sets the conditions of possibility for being able to see Theron as Wuornos; the portrayal keeps us there.



Figure 2. Virginia Woolf/Nicole Kidman in *The Hours*/Nicole Kidman comparison. [Untitled photo comparison]. Retrieved from <http://thefilmexperience.net/blog/2014/3/31/womens-history-month-nicole-kidman-as-virginia-woolf.html>; Brown, F.M. (2008, Oct. 6). 15th annual women in Hollywood event – arrivals [Online image]. Retrieved from gettyimages.com.

Nicole Kidman put on a nose. That’s pretty much it. And, actually, that nose did a whole lot of work for her. It didn’t, really, make her ugly, as many of the reviews – critical and otherwise – noted. (And nor should it have.) But it did make her look different – utterly different. (Which noses do, and I think a lot more about the role of noses and their manipulation in a lot of my earlier work.) Again, almost unrecognizable. And again, that’s precisely the point. Nicole Kidman, starlet and ex-wife of Tom Cruise, is a different kind of performer than this woman, star of serious thinking women’s drama.



Figure 3. Jennifer Aniston in *Cake*/Jennifer Aniston comparison. Cinelou Releasing & Coppola, M./Getty. (nd). [Untitled photo comparison]. Retrieved from <http://www.vulture.com/2015/01/history-of-actors-going-ugly-for-the-role.html>.

Aniston? Well, she's pretty recognizable. She looks like the common tabloid feature "Stars Without Makeup." She hasn't done much prosthetic manipulation – less than the other two case studies. She does have makeup, of course, to recreate the complexion of a woman in chronic pain, and to produce the scars that speak to the source of that pain. She's also gained weight. And yes, while she gets gritty in both her self-presentation and in her portrayal, she's still Jennifer Aniston without makeup playing a woman in chronic pain. She does it well, probably (as we'll see) better than the movie around her, but she's still not transformed. (And I'm not saying that's why she didn't get the awards she was expecting – the movie is pretty wretched despite her best efforts – but it might be a piece of the puzzle.)

I don't want to get too much into the weeds of these films, but I'll give a brief outline of each to make to frame the subsequent argument.

Monster is the most powerful in many ways, so I'll start with that. The 2003 film is based on the story of serial killer and prostitute Aileen Wuornos, played by Charlize Theron. The story tracks Wuornos' relationship with Selby Wall (Christina Ricci) and the pair's attempt to support themselves. Wuornos tries to leave hooking but cannot find other sources of income. As she returns to the streets, she is brutalized by a john whom she kills while defending herself.

Subsequent john murders are committed under murkier conditions as Wuornos' mental health

seems to decline under growing pressure. Wall collaborates with the police to gather evidence on Wuornos, who takes sole responsibility in order to protect her lover. Wuornos was convicted and executed by the state.

2002's *The Hours* is based on the Pulitzer prize winning novel of the same name by Michael Cunningham. It tells the story of three women in different time periods; one, Virginia Woolf (played by Nicole Kidman) who is writing the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* while coming to terms with her sexuality; another, played by Julianne Moore, who is reading the novel, and a third, played by Meryl Streep, who is essentially living it. All three women struggle with depression and are linked through their shared longings, fears, and experiences, along with some shared history.

Cake, released in 2014, tells the story of Claire Bennett (as portrayed by Jennifer Aniston), a car crash survivor whose marriage has collapsed in the wake of the crash and the death of her child. Bennett develops a relationship with the widower of a now-dead member of her chronic pain support group, who committed suicide at the outset of the film. The story focuses on Claire's struggles to live with her physical and emotional pain and the barriers these pose to her maintaining friendships and relationships.

I have drawn these films together in particular not through any major similarity in plot, style, or narrative, though they all stand out as being films with strong female leads. What binds

them (related to the female leads, of course) is that they all feature marquee actresses who deliberately and fairly dramatically altered their appearances to be significantly less glamorous, attractive, and conventional. But even here, as I've already hinted at, *Cake* is a bit of an outlier. It is the only film of the three that does not contain a historical character; Aniston's transformation then, is to look like "anyone" and "everyone" (as opposed to the very specific look of a Hollywood star); both Theron and Kidman are measured against historical figures and their very specific ways of talking and moving and being in the world. In a way, they had the harder job, and in a way, they had much more that they could achieve.

And, it's worth noting, they did. The reviews of both *Monster* and *The Hours* were highly laudatory of both the performances and the films themselves; the reviews of *Cake* are much more mixed. As part of my research, I looked at scholarly and journalistic cinema reviews for these three films (and many others). While a number of themes emerged across the film reviews, there are also important specificities that I want to highlight. But what emerged to me overall, and notably, was the ways in which the reviews discussed the deglamming process in depth, but in their attention to the portrayals themselves was a much stronger focus on the gestural and the bodily. While the deglamming was noteworthy and important as a part of the presentation of the characters, it was far from the major work. And of course, the immediately visual aspects of a

role are only the beginning for actors – they do, actually, have to act. But in the case of women, and star celebrities in particular, acting isn't enough. The celebrity machine gets in the way when actresses try to work against type. While the reviews were not consciously echoing that barrier, their commentary almost universally understood deglamming as that which allowed the viewers to suspend their disbelief at the outset.

Even in the positive reviews, there are strong emphases on the contributions of the director, makeup artist and the script itself; the story here is a highly gendered one that refuses to give full credit to the actress for her ability to completely immerse herself in a role.

Consider for example Marjorie Baumgarten's (2014, Jan. 16) review of *Monster* in the *Austin Chronicle*, who writes that:

Certainly, the much-ballyhooed performance of Theron is ferocious and terrifying. Dental prosthetics and make-up afford Theron (who is also one of the film's producers) a striking resemblance to Wuornos, and the actress has clearly studied her subject's body movements and demeanor. If you didn't know that this was the same actress who provided window dressing for so many lackluster movies, the realization would be startling. Without taking away from the power of her performance, I suspect much of the praise she's currently receiving is really applause for her willingness to erase her beauty with extra flesh, bad skin, and a foul temper.

This is a complicated set of comments. The critic is distancing herself from those other critics who praise Theron's work only because of her willingness to be ugly (and not even the effectiveness of the ugliness itself.) But certainly, if that were all it took, we'd be seeing a lot

more praise of deglamming – many actors uglify to less enthusiastic critical response. At the same time, the critic equivocates, emphasizing that she isn't among those who cheer only for this reason. She is careful to say that there is great power in Theron's "ferocious and terrifying" performance, while denigrating her other work as window dressing. But rather than committing to recognizing the entirety of Theron's presentation, she attributes its convincing nature to study and impressive prosthetic work. These have created "a striking resemblance," which implies that a lot of the work was done for her. And yet, the rest of the review speaks to the completeness with which the reviewer accepted Theron's performance, discussing the character as "aggressive, ill-mannered, and butch," all of which occur on the level of embodied gesture and speech rather than prosthetics and makeup.

Part of – or maybe most of – what makes Charlize Theron's performance so breathtaking, is the way in which she embodied the character at the level of gesture, carriage, and expression. Remember: Aileen Wuornos was almost certainly very mentally ill and had been deeply abused from childhood onward. She was tough and had to protect herself.

The *Montreal Film Journal* is more explicitly laudatory than the *Austin Chronicle*, arguing that *Monster* is "a must-see if only for Charlize Theron's extraordinary performance. The usually gorgeous blonde is unrecognizable as Wuornos, all bad hair, bad skin, and fat ass. Yet this is

more than a physical transformation, we can see all the hurt and anger in the world in her eyes, she's like wild beast" (Kevin, 2004, Feb. 3). Here, the emphasis is on the transformation within, as the physical embodiment of Wuornos is only part of the embodiment that Theron expresses. As Stephen Holden (2003, Dec. 24) at the *New York Times* put it, "With crooked yellowed teeth that jut from a mouth that spews profanity in a surly staccato, a freckled weather-beaten face and a prizefighter's swagger, Charlize Theron pulls off the year's most astounding screen makeover...at the very least the disappearance of the cool and creamy blond star in to the body of a ruddy, bedraggled street person is an astounding cosmetic stunt." "But," Holden continues, "Ms. Theron's transformation, supervised by the makeup wizard Toni G, is not just a matter of surfaces." Rather, "she uncovers the lost, love-starved child cowering under the killer's hard shell" with "the emotional intensity of [an] unforgettable performance."

In its denigration of Theron's earlier work, the Austin review is far from unusual; reference to Theron as a blonde starlet with an inconsequential resume is common. Ty Burr (2004, Jan. 9) at the *Boston Globe* echoes the window dressing sentiment by referring to Theron as "a small, decorative bangle on the arm of thrillers like "The Italian Job" and "15 Minutes." The review opens with physicality, and continues in this vein, noting that "Her appearance in "Monster," then, comes as a discombobulating shock. She's *huge*. She's been given the sort of physical makeover that begs for Oscar nominations – dowdy hair, false teeth, mottled skin – but it's the

size of the performance that's transformative. Wide-shouldered and thick-waisted, Theron bullies her way through the film as if she wanted to pick a fight with the cast and audience." There is a recognition here that the physical transformation is itself the window dressing, and it is the performance that is the real change. And perhaps the performance is possible without the makeup (but not without the gestural embodiment), but it would be impossible for the audience to see it. Burr is highly self-aware of the tropes that surround this kind of process, noting that "this sort of project – in which a beautiful starlet de-glams for a tour of the lower depths, is easy to mock," but he doesn't mock it, because Theron pulls it off. Because the physical transformation was successful enough to create the estrangement that made Theron "huge", made her "beefy and obstreperous," as part of a project of "locating humanity where few would have cared to bother." The review closes with another flash of self-consciousness, as Burr writes that "it's the kind of performance that seems calculated to attract the Academy's attention, except for one thing: I forgot all about Oscar, and Theron, as I was watching it." And that, I think, is exactly the point.



Figure 4. Charlize Theron and Christina Ricci in *Monster*. This promotional still from Alvarado, et al. (2003) highlights the size difference between Theron and Ricci's characters and Theron's attained bulk. Retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0340855/mediaviewer/rm698857472>.

Figure 4 is the still that accompanied most reviews: chosen to highlight Theron's size, her presence – the shot is composed to make Theron loom large over the already small and here even smaller Ricci. It also shows the face, unrecognizable as Theron, of course, but also unfocused, looking in the distance in a classic scene of isolation...these people clearly have nowhere to go. Nicole Kidman doesn't fudge her size. She's tall, of course, but she's also in a way tiny. And as Virginia Woolf, she stays tiny in that sense, self-effacing, depressive, falling out of the frame rather than filling it. Is she unrecognizable? (Figure 5.)

Well, she's certainly not unattractive to *Salon's* Andrew O'Hehir (2002, Dec. 27), who thinks that "she's sexy, all right, but in a sort of challenging, androgynous mode." Which, of course, is exactly what Kidman was going for. Nicole Kidman, who "is difficult to see...in this

movie's Virginia Woolf, and that's not just a matter of the fake nose," is sexy in a decidedly unandrogynous mode.



Figure 5. Virginia Woolf/Nicole Kidman in *The Hours* comparison. Hulton Archive/Getty & Paramount Pictures. (nd). Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf [Online image]. Retrieved from http://assets.nydailynews.com/polopoly_fs/1.97226.1475703777!/img/httpImage/image.jpg_gen/derivatives/gallery_1200/nicole-kidman-virginia-woolf.jpg

Stella Papamichael (2003, Feb. 10) at the *BBC* sees the nose as window dressing; it is “beneath that latex lump on her face [that] Kidman deftly captures the stillness and mania of the clinically depressed Woolf.” What is the value of the lump then? Perhaps to allow for something to happen beneath it. To allow Kidman, as Gary Susman (2003, Jan. 9-16) writes for the *Boston Phoenix*, to “disappear...into the role of Woolf.” But it’s not (only) the prosthetics that allow this actorly magic trick (and, again, disappearing into roles is what actors *do*, isn’t it?); it’s “not just because of the putty nose and the wig that disguise her appearance, but because she draws on

some deep reserve of power that bubbles up through her unearthly stare and makes her scenes, whether she's raging or in good humor, scary and exciting."

This is echoed almost verbatim by the *Montreal Film Journal*, which notes that "Nicole Kidman disappears into Virginia Woolf, and it's not just about the fake nose that makes her unrecognizable. She conveys perfectly that thin line between insanity and genius, the way a writer's ability to "see" and understand the world can be a curse" (Kevin, 2003, Jan. 14). (And I ask, again, isn't that what actors *do*? Why would it be only due to the nose, rather than the performance, that Kidman becomes unrecognizable? Because Kidman, as a star, is a brand, not just an actor. What needs to be rendered unrecognizable is not the person but the brand she inhabits. That is what needs distancing. The nose does it only insofar as it unsettles the image; we can still see Kidman beneath, if we try hard enough. But we don't try, because we are convinced instead to look for Woolf.)

The *Film Journal International* doesn't think that Kidman quite pulls it off, identifying Kidman's "disguise" which she is "hiding behind" as "a distraction; she impersonates rather than embodies" (Abeel, 2004, Nov. 1). This critique understands the importance of a distancing device for Kidman's persona, but finds the performance itself to be lacking, drawing attention back to the devices rather than rendering them invisible. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*'s Barbara Vancheri (2003, Jan. 17) disagrees, arguing that Kidman's "outer trapping as Virginia Woolf –

mousy brown hair, shapeless dresses – aren't as important as her ability to dim the inner light that burned so brightly in movies such as "Moulin Rouge" and "Batman Forever." It's not just the halo of red curls that are missing; the dazzle has been doused." To put it another way: Kidman is in character.

The *New York Times*' Stephen Holden (2002, Dec. 27) returns to the cinematic cliché of bravery, impressed by the way that "Nicole Kidman tunnels like a ferret into the soul of a woman besieged by excruciating bouts of mental illness." The "performance of astounding bravery," then, is not about the deglamming, but the willingness to leap into the depressive abyss. There is value to the disguise though: "a prosthetic nose helps Ms. Kidman achieve an uncanny physical resemblance" to Virginia Woolf. And while I'm not sure that's true, exactly, it doesn't matter: what the nose does do, certainly for the *Times*, is signal that this isn't Kidman, not anymore, not onscreen. It's Virginia Woolf.

David Edelstein (2002, Dec. 31) at *Slate* offers the most explicit review of the work done for the audience by the nose, writing that "it liberates [Kidman]. This might be the first time that moviegoers realize how an actor can be limited by a pretty, turned-up nose as much as by a giant honker; it doesn't change how she acts, but it changes how we see her."

How do we see her? Interestingly, there were far fewer stills accompanying these reviews than those of *Monster*. Many were drawn from the film's poster, which featured all three women, but in the Kidman-focused reviews, we are often shown Figure 6.



Figure 6. Nicole Kidman in *The Hours*. Publicity still from Alden et al. (2002), retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0274558/mediaviewer/rm1445235712>.

The dress is baggy, the hair messy, the eyes off to the side. Woolf, in a nod to the moment and in a nod to history, is smoking. The nose is visible, important, doing its work to distance the image from Kidman's traditional appearance, but is not dominant. It is not the source of attention.

And no, she's not ugly. Not even close. (Beauty sells.)



Figure 7. Behind the scenes still of Jennifer Aniston on the set of *Cake*. Blanco, W., & AKM-GSI Media. (nd). [Untitled online image]. Retrieved

from <http://www.eonline.com/news/529483/jennifer-aniston-wears-no-makeup-sports-a-huge-scar-on-set-of-her-latest-movie>.

Figure 7 is more complicated. Jennifer Aniston still looks fundamentally like Jennifer Aniston. Like Jennifer Aniston on a bad day when her trainer quit, and she couldn't wash her hair and the makeup artist went rogue and all she wanted was to curl up in beige sweats. (We've all been there.) But this is still Aniston. Was the distancing not enough here? Or maybe it wasn't as necessary, both for the role itself (which is not a historical one) and for the performance more broadly?

Or maybe it just isn't good. The *Boston Globe* critic, Peter Keough (2015, Jan. 22), writes that "she has so many scars on her face she looks like Edward Scissorhands on a bad day." J.R. Jones (2015, Jan. 28) at the *Chicago Reader* disagrees, placing Aniston's role amongst rather heady lineage of "glamorous movie actresses [who] often win respect through highly unflattering roles," including "Jessica Lange ranting and raving as the mentally ill starlet in *Frances* (1982),

Nicole Kidman wearing dowdy outfits and a prosthetic nose as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* (2002), Charlize Theron grunting out as trailer-trash serial killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003).” In fact, “Playing an unattractive woman has certainly been the ticket this year for Jennifer Aniston, whom I knew as a hairstyle before I knew her as a performance.” So maybe, in this case, all that was needed was the removal of the hairstyle, or a hairstyle at all, to achieve the necessary distance from starlet-dom? (Is Aniston’s bad hair in this film a kind of prosthetic, even more than Theron’s given the relationship between Aniston and her hair?)

For Liam Lacey (2015, Jan. 23) at *The Globe and Mail*, it’s also all about the “famous hair,” which Aniston “lets...get lanky in *Cake*.” This is, for Lacey, the most important visual signifier; the “visible-but-not-disfiguring scars on her face and body” are almost not worthy of note.

The tone of these reviews is overall significantly more biting, more negative, and more mocking of Aniston’s endeavor, and, by extension, the entire deglamming project. Kyle Smith (2015, Jan. 21) at the *New York Post* frames the performance as one that is “gunning for the near-annual Ugly Makeup Oscar.” That is simply a fact, for him; Aniston fails to get it, he claims, because she “proves, as always, a modestly gifted actress, only this time with scars and weedy hair.”

The *Cake* reviews continue in a similar vein, some impressed with Aniston’s individual performance despite the flaws of the movie, others seeing the film and Aniston of a (lower

quality) piece. Puns and mockery run rife; this is, by-and-large, not a performance that critics take all that seriously, even those who like it.

Of course, Aniston does not transform herself in the same way as the other two actors I've focused on. She is, still, recognizably herself. She's not trying to look like a particular historical character. She's not attempting to transport us into someone we imagine we already knew, a little. But, like all acting performances, she is trying to transport us. To make us lose our sense of her in favor of her character. And her character demands some level of deglamming; an acerbic and embittered woman in chronic pain, she is hardly red-carpet ready. And, in fact, many roles require some level of deglamming, some level of uglification, at least in moments; even on screen, actresses don't (always) wake up looking perfect (sometimes they do. Too often they do.) But the reason the deglamming gets rehearsed so often in these reviews is that it is unsuccessful. Or, rather, despite a strong performance, Aniston herself is unsuccessful. Our disbelief is not entirely suspended. We are not transported. She is not transformed. Even as we watch Jennifer Aniston as Claire, we are painfully aware of the Aniston beneath the Claire, beneath the scars, beneath the makeup. In a way, perhaps in this case, Aniston should have stayed herself. (And maybe the brand of Jennifer Aniston – a kind of a beautiful girl next door – didn't quite need the

same estrangement that Theron and Kidman did. So the estrangement worked against Aniston's performance instead of for it.)

To Melissa Maerz (2015, Jan. 27) at *EW*, the deglamming is ineffective in Aniston's case partly because it is so obvious. It works against the performance by distracting from it. It becomes a kind of a cheap trick. She critiques the attention paid to deglamming in cinema in general, and in this film in particular. Of Aniston, Maerz writes that "she has scars on her body, a haggard look on her face, and hair that's so stringy it could have been shampooed with chlorine and bacon grease." That's the point, of course, as Maerz continues: "When it comes to awards-show-bait dramas like *Cake*, which earned Aniston a Golden Globe nomination, that's supposed to be part of the appeal." It's about the audience and our own desires, apparently: "Moviegoers so love to see Hollywood beauties stripped of their vanity—*underneath all those fancy, placenta-infused beauty products, they look just like us!*—that we're expected to applaud when they're rewarded for it." But that is a fundamentally problematic construct, Maerz argues: "But the idea that Aniston should be celebrated for "going ugly," as the women of *The View* put it, is condescending both to regular women (how is it "ugly" to look like an average fortysomething human with a perfect yoga body and a few scars?) and to Aniston herself, whose understated performance is far more nuanced than her bad drugstore make-up suggests."

In one of the marquee stills from the film (Figure 8), Aniston is crying. Her clothes are shapeless, her hair is unglamorous, and her scars are visible. She looks like a woman in pain. She looks like Jennifer Aniston in pain.



Figure 8. Jennifer Aniston in *Cake*. Publicity still from Aniston et al. (2014), retrieved from <http://www.cinelou.com/cake.html>.

But for the preview image for the trailer (Figure 9), the only notable difference between Aniston and Claire are the scars. And, sure, that's what acting is. We tend to recognize actors in movies, unless there is some kind of dramatic intervention. But here, the scars seem to be just a distraction. Or a trick.

Having said that, Aniston's performance, at the level of gesture, is a profound physical representation of chronic pain. She is more transporting in these moments than anywhere else.

Her representation of a body in pain is stunning, moving, visceral, and right on. But not quite enough – it still feels like a disguise.



Figure 9. Preview image from the *Cake* trailer on YouTube. From Aniston et al. (2014), retrieved from <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/jvthpbGEUcg/maxresdefault.jpg>.

It is worth noting that in all three cases, the female leads were deeply involved in the production process for the films. *The Boston Globe* noted that “Aniston served as executive producer for the movie, which is generally what happens when a Hollywood actor finds a role that will allow him to stretch but that no one in the business would think to offer him” (Keough, 2015, Jan. 22). Ironically, even in this context the *Globe* used male pronouns.

Conclusion

There are a number of reasons that female celebrities choose – or are required – to estrange themselves from previous branding. In this case I’ve explored three women whose personas may have prevented audiences from entering fully into their performances because they worked so very counter to the images these stars had carefully cultivated. While in many ways celebrity

branding has intensified dramatically in the era of social media, there is a long tradition to actresses being branded and framed, particularly those controlled by the early studio system. There are important historical precedents like the rebranding of Lucille Ball from screen ingénue to clutzy television comedienne, and Greta Garbo's careful navigation of nationalist tensions (Doty, 1990; Rédei, 2006). In the larger project I also consider other kinds of dramatic challenges to type and brand, particularly around the portrayal of LGBT characters over time.

Finally, I think about the ever-present question of weight and bodies, and the ways that those transformations are often gendered; men manipulate their bodies to different effect than women. (And also facial hair: we always knew when Robin Williams was being serious because he had a beard.) (And, by the way, Robin Williams' serious beard has both its own Facebook group and its own Pinterest page.) Through this work, I will be tracking the moments when the physical and the gestural work together in the performative sphere, and when the physical presents a barrier to the possibilities of gestural and embodied performance, and how that tension is navigated.

I've started here with three case studies of so-called deglamming, arguing that the ugly itself isn't the point. But that's probably overstating the case somewhat. Ugly isn't the only point, but it's certainly part of the issue. I've also downplayed the bravery of uglification, but

that's also a little unfair. It *is* brave, partly, as the Aniston case shows, because there are huge risks if the actor doesn't pull it off. Failed deglamming...deglamming that doesn't do the work of estrangement because the actor doesn't convince the audience in her role, becomes simply an unsuccessful performance. And not even one that is nice to watch. And it's highly gendered, onscreen as in life: we rarely talk about how men – even actors – look, except maybe in the cases when they make a dramatic change. For female actors, we never don't talk about how they look; the dramatic changes they make often replace the narrative around the work that they do on screen. There is space for a much more thorough and theoretical critique of the performance of the body and the performance of the self in celebrity culture, thinking back towards historical precedents for changing yourself to gain space to move, and plunge the depths, on screen. Here we've seen three cases of deglamming, some more extreme than others and some more successful than others. And we've thought about the ways that celebrity appearance scripts celebrity performance in ways that can often be professionally limiting, to the extent that for certain female actors to be able to act, they have to act ugly. They have to become ugly. It's not just Oscar-bait though: it's a bid for freedom.

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