A Paradox of Truth and Fiction: Meryl Streep and Acting Modern Realism

LUCY VAN ATTA

"The truth? I don't even know what is the truth, after all these lies I've told." It is the summer of 1947, and Sophie Zawistowska is seated on the dark ledge in front of a bay window in a Brooklyn boarding house, speaking to Stingo, a young southern writer whom she and her lover, Nathan, have befriended. It is late in the evening, and the only sound is Sophie's voice, hushed to almost a whisper. She looks at Stingo for a moment, as though searching for something in his face, and then, turning back to fix her eyes on the glass pane in front of her, she begins to confess the real story of her former life, a past which she has repeatedly (and even desperately) tried to suppress. In a monologue that is both captivating and heartbreaking in its raw, naked vulnerability—a simple, continuous scene that takes the place of the customary montage of flashbacks one might expect at this point in the film—Sophie, played by Meryl Streep, transports herself back in time to German-occupied Poland and her position as a young, Catholic wife and daughter to Nazi sympathizers. The camera never leaves Streep's face as she describes, in a thick Polish accent, how her devoted love for her father turned into an overwhelming hate (once she realized the truth behind his "belief in the possibility of human perfection" and his plans for a solution to the "Poland Jewish Problem"), why she left her husband and took her children into hiding, how she watched the Gestapo cut her lover's throat (as punishment for his work in the Resistance), and how she and her family were eventually arrested and sent to Auschwitz (*Sophie's Choice*).

Throughout this speech, we as viewers witness every memory manifested physically in Sophie's expressions: in the movements of her eyes and mouth, the tears that flow slowly along her high cheekbones (which she makes no effort to wipe away), and the juxtaposition of love and pain, pride and sorrow reflected on her face and in her voice. She continues her account

of Auschwitz, explaining to Stingo how the Nazis murdered her daughter and took her son away to the "children's camp," and how she worked as a secretary for the Commandant, walking every day past the blocks of the prisoners selected for extermination and watching them reach out their hands to her through the bars, pleading for help. Sophie tells of the Commandant's promise to free her son and his subsequent betrayal, and also of her attempted suicide in Sweden after liberation—and I feel myself gradually pulled into her world, my role as a detached spectator shattered as her narrative grows ever more vivid and my own mental images seem increasingly real. It is as though Sophie's emotional memory has become my own, for such is Streep's power to capture and express the complex poignancy of the human condition in ways that are both intimate and universal.

Meryl Streep, who won the Oscar for Best Actress in 1982 for her exquisite work in *Sophie's Choice*, has gained legendary acclaim throughout her career for her ability to transform herself entirely into each unique character she plays—and yet, somewhat ironically, her own distinctive presence as an actress and individual radiates from each role. In spite of Streep's tremendous versatility, a certain familiar quality permeates every performance—a strong (albeit elusive) sense of the real woman behind each finely crafted persona—which makes one wonder where exactly the actress ends and the character begins. However, it seems impossible to draw this kind of boundary in any of Streep's performances, for the actress and the character are so wholly interrelated each time (in thought, memory, setting, relationships, mannerisms) that they become part of each other. Sophie Zawistowska, for instance, is immortalized through Meryl Streep's idiosyncratic physical and vocal traits, and her story is forever imprinted in Streep's own emotional memory, forming an unforgettable part of Streep's experience as an artist. Just as there exists a blurred line between truth and lies for Sophie, an ambiguity surrounding the reality of the events in her past and the heavily altered "truth" she has told so many times in America, there is too a certain overlap between reality and fiction in Streep's acting. By nature, acting is a paradox: a revelation of the deepest secrets of one's own soul through the mask of another person. A great performance is at once a clever, convincing lie and a courageous act of extreme honesty, and the actor's constant struggle lies in the attempt to reconcile these opposing truths, to strike a harmonious balance between them.

Using Constantin Stanislavski's revolutionary work with the Moscow Art Theatre as a starting point, American actors and teachers such as Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, and Sanford Meisner tried throughout the twentieth century to devise a clear, logical method for fusing these two crucial elements of the-

ater—personal truth and skilled illusion—in order to create a technique that would raise acting to a new level of passionate realism. Though their individual philosophies eventually led them in different directions, these theorists developed a fundamental system for building a character, relating to other actors, drawing from personal experience, and living in imaginary circumstances that set the foundation of modern naturalistic acting. In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T.S. Eliot asserts that to be a good artist in any medium, one must have a solid historical sense of all the influences and traditions that have contributed to the evolution of one's art form. "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone," Eliot argues, "for his significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists" (506). Indeed, Streep has such remarkable artistic range and strength due to her thorough study and understanding of the history of her craft and the technical elements established by those who came before her. Trained at the Yale School of Drama, her performances reflect the teachings of former great minds of the theater, exemplified in her own diligent preparation for each role. In *Sophie's Choice*, Streep's disarmingly natural, candid embodiment of Sophie echoes Stanislavski's principle of "living the part" (15), while her meticulous construction of her character's memories (the specific details of both Sophie's outer environment and her inner world) references Stella Adler. Lee Strasberg's emphasis on sensory recollection and personal experience can be seen in the fluid dynamic of Streep's emotions (her capacity to find joy within sorrow, sorrow within joy—and to express each state with such immediacy), and Meisner's concept of energy between actors is apparent in her constant awareness of her scene partners and her maintenance of a charged relationship in the cause and effect of every interaction.

Where, though, in the midst of all this technique, is the mark of an "individual talent," the "peculiar essence" of a great artist, as opposed to a well-trained student of tradition (Eliot 505)? What distinguishes a truly powerful, transcendent performance from the simple mastery of a craft? For Streep, this heightened level of artistic prowess, this ability to employ the established elements of modern dramatic method to move beyond them, lies in her unique gift for understanding many different kinds of human beings *from the inside out*. For every character she plays, Streep has learned to *become* another person through the close examination of that person's life circumstances (setting, relationships, social structure, language, skills, education, and cultural customs) and the use of that knowledge to gain insight into the character's beliefs, opinions, fears, and desires. She learned Polish for the role of Sophie

and practiced the violin for five hours a day as research for the part of Roberta Guaspari in *Music of the Heart* (1999). In his discussion of the purpose and significance of a single artist in the larger context of his or her discipline (and even in the world as a whole), Eliot contends that the sign of a real artist, a fully matured talent, is the "continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable, . . . continual self-sacrifice" for the sake of a work and its greater, more universal meaning for humanity (507). In the case of an actor, this means the temporary sacrifice of one's own identity and personal story for those of another person. In training herself to literally think, speak, and move as a character, Meryl Streep has achieved that goal to a greater extent than perhaps any other actor in the history of film.

According to Streep herself, however, the creation of a character who is fully alive, who contains all the complexity and soul of a real human being, depends on the discovery of certain crucial aspects of one's own truest self *within* the character—and then the organic expression of that truth-within-fiction through behavior. "Acting is not about being someone different," Streep told Ken Burns in an interview, "it's finding the similarity in what is apparently different, then finding myself in there" (1). Because, as an actress, she works within the structure of a script and thus uses the words of someone else as her base material, Streep must use gesture, tone, movement, sound, and physical reaction—theatrical components that convey meaning beyond the lines—to express her presence within the character, as well as her own interpretive contribution to the nuances and message of the story. It was this concept of equal communication through behavior and words, this concentration on the value of "subtext," that defined the innovations of the Moscow Art Theatre—and Stanislavski's work with writer Anton Chekhov—and produced a new type of realistic drama. In Chekhov's plays, as opposed to older theatrical works like Shakespeare's, the text itself is extremely sparse, indirect, and even vague, leaving the actors responsible for deciphering the motivations, emotions, and intentions of each character, and then conveying all that inner life and all those suppressed feelings through deliberate physical and vocal choices. Thus, the true substance of Chekhov's plays may not be understood by simply reading them; one must *see them performed* to get the complete story. Film, which has essentially replaced plays in contemporary culture, works much the same way; the most important elements in a movie are visual rather than verbal, and it is nearly impossible to take in the full meaning of a film by just reading the screenplay.

Because cinematic storytelling revolves around action instead of words, modern acting has become almost exclusively an art of behavior, for the

actor's creative task is to cultivate a life behind the words, to generate and display the subtext that supports the lines—to add flesh and blood to the skeleton of the script. After all, we as human beings reveal nearly all of our true thoughts, emotions, opinions, fears, and desires through nonverbal communication. We speak to each other in body language, through tone of voice, hand gestures, facial expressions, and the way we relate to the objects and people that make up our environment—and it is the actor's responsibility to complement a character's lines, to fill the spaces between and around those lines, with this kind of authentic action. As Anne Bogart points out in "Stereotype"—an essay that explores both the danger and value of stereotypes in theatrical work—acting is a deceptively challenging art, for "an actor actually has to reinvent walking and talking to be able to perform those actions effectively . . . in fact, the most familiar actions are perhaps the most difficult to inhabit either with a fresh life or a straight face" (525). An actor must strive to make familiar actions and emotions spontaneous and real rather than succumbing to common stereotypes of gesture and reaction; to do so, he or she must invent new, unexpected behavioral choices that express classic emotions in rediscovered ways—and which therefore rejuvenate the genuine energy of both the scene and character.

In one of the final scenes of *Out of Africa* (1985), Meryl Streep (playing Karen Blixen, the film's heroine) exemplifies this idea of emotion contained in gesture when she employs a series of specific, unusual physical actions to evoke a profound sense of grief and loss. Karen's lover, Dennis, has been killed in a plane crash, and she stands at his funeral, watching the casket as it is lowered into the ground. She does not weep but rather bends down and picks up a handful of dirt—the soil of the African plains, which Dennis so loved—holding it out above the grave, preparing to let it fall in. Instead of dropping it, though, she keeps her hand suspended there for a long moment, her wrist subtly shaking and her fingers tightening around the dirt. Then, abruptly, she pulls her fist back in, clutching the soil to her breast—as though desperate to keep and protect it, to preserve and hold on to something—and walks away from the funeral party, toward the savannah. Karen lowers her hand to her side as she walks, allowing the dirt to spill out into the tall grass, and then, once she reaches the edge of the hill, she unfastens her hat to let her hair tangle in the wind. Through Streep's commitment to each singular action and to the intensity of feeling that drives every movement, we suddenly know Karen in all her sorrow and love, her wisdom and fragility and strength. We see the tragedy of her story manifested physically, in simple, deliberate choices which redefine our cultural vision of grief—for Streep's

actions defy any stereotype of sadness or despair, expressing instead a mixture of emotions and a personal truth which is ultimately far more poignant.

Though rebellion against cliché is a necessary part of the artistic process and a crucial element of modern naturalism, stereotypes, when used the right way, can prove quite valuable to an actor in the creation of certain characters—as in Streep's wickedly glamorous, icy performance as Miranda Priestley, editor of *Runway* magazine in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). In her examination of the cultural significance of clichés and their relevance to drama, Anne Bogart refers to "putting a fire under a stereotype" to expand it into a heightened version of realistic humanity (524). "When approaching stereotype as an ally," she explains, "you burn through it, undefining it and allowing human experience to perform its alchemy" (528). Streep makes use of this approach in her portrayal of Miranda; she begins with a caricature of a heartless, high-powered fashion executive and infuses it with the complicated emotions and detailed inner life of a true person, gradually revealing glimpses of the imperfection (and even the compassion) behind Miranda's sharp façade as the plot progresses. While the editor of *Runway* could easily have been played as a one-dimensional villain out to destroy Andy, the film's naïve protagonist, Streep's awareness and expression of the role's seductiveness and complexity raises the entire film to a new level of intelligence and depth. Instead of a predictable battle of good vs. evil, *The Devil Wears Prada* becomes a subtle psychological study of character, manipulation, sacrifice, and the dynamics of power.

Along with her discussion of stereotype as "a container of memory" that can be "entered, heated up, and awakened" by a talented artist (thus adding extra heft and theatrical energy to an ordinary role) (525), Bogart also investigates the concept of "inherited cultural memory" and its effect on an actor's comprehension of material (523). Bogart argues that as human beings, we are born with a mysterious sense of what came before us without having consciously learned it—we have an innate understanding of moments in history that we ourselves have never actually lived through. "In the theater we reach out and touch the past . . . so that we might receive and relive significant and relevant human questions in the present and then pass them on to future generations," she believes (531). Actors have a particular sensitivity to this phenomenon of instinctive recollection and are thus often able to access memories that exist outside their own personal experience, memories which are more felt than known. Streep herself describes this idea of "some kind of improvisational response that comes from somewhere unknown" in her interview with Ken Burns: "I think the secret of it does have something to do with

our shared DNA," she muses, "that everyone in Europe went through Charlemagne" (2). In the process of transforming herself into a character, an actress must both draw from her own life (find herself within the character, as Streep does) and rely on her imagination to build a new reality, aided by her intuitive link to the collective memory of her culture. "I did *Kramer vs. Kramer* before I had children," Streep explains, "but the mother I would be was already inside me. . . . I think actors can awaken things that are in all of us: our evil, our cruelty, our grace. Actors can call these things up more easily than other people " (2). In a way, there are certain areas of an actress's own soul that she can express *only* through performance, through the vessel of another person's life—for she might otherwise never experience these emotions, perspectives, and situations in her own everyday life.

Because actors must live truthfully within the context of another identity and are therefore able to discover psychological and emotional elements of *themselves* that were never before apparent, it follows that good acting is simply the actor's own honest, unadulterated response to a fictional environment. Streep demonstrates this principle in her monologue as Joanna in the courtroom scene of *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). Although her lines deal with emotional material—her failed marriage, her abandonment of her son, her realizations about herself and her place as a mother, and her desire to regain custody of her child—Streep's delivery of them is straightforward. She does not try to manufacture feeling, but rather speaks as plainly as possible, allowing her own emotions as a person and actress to come through as they may. The result is immensely powerful: we watch her full process as she sets up for herself the reality of the situation, the *cause* for an emotional response, and then absorbs that cause, living vibrantly within it and then responding organically to her own words. The tears that begin to stream down her face halfway through her speech are *real*—they belong to Meryl Streep as well as to Joanna Kramer; a profoundly authentic moment of genuine human experience is captured on film. This spontaneity is the source of a great performance, and the capacity to construct such vivid circumstances that they produce a natural reaction is the mark of a skilled actor.

In light of these ideas—acting as an honest response to fictional circumstances, enhanced by an inherited cultural memory—Streep's monologue by the dark windowsill in *Sophie's Choice*, during which she tells Stingo the horrifying story of her past in Poland, takes on new meaning. Rather than viewing her performance as merely a skilled manipulation of her face and voice, as techniques used to capture the patterns of human emotion and to draw us into a compelling illusion, I begin to see it as Streep's own candid, raw emo-

tional reaction to Sophie Zawistowska's experiences as a character. The actress is indeed fully present within the world of the character, even more so than I had previously believed; the scene now seems to me a vision into Streep's own inherited cultural memory—her own personal understanding of the Holocaust, of motherhood, of loss and guilt and despair, of the determination for a new life and the struggle to maintain hope. In the words of Anne Bogart, when we act we become "shapes of history filled with the reverberation of our actual engagement, sorrow, and freedom" (527), and Streep, in the shape of Sophie, *lives* this story of persecution, shame, and survival with full awareness and sincerity.

Perhaps the great artists—and even great scenes, such as Joanna's plea in the courtroom or Sophie's late-night confession to Stingo—leave such a strong emotional impression on us as viewers because they awaken our own inherited cultural memory and even draw out aspects of our own souls that might have otherwise never appeared to us. Performances like Streep's (in *Sophie's Choice*, *Out of Africa*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and even *The Devil Wears Prada*) expand and deepen our own understanding of ourselves through the empathy they elicit and the conscious and subconscious associations they trigger. They bring the past to life, illuminating both the magnitude and the individuality of human experience, in all its fragility and strength, its suffering and beauty, its ultimate nobility, and its imperfection. Theater, as a social institution, reflects life on an eternal scale; it tells the story of our collective presence in this world, spread across so many different places and generations, yet united by the instinctive sensibility we each possess for the universal qualities, needs, desires, weaknesses, joys, and sacrifices that connect us through time and space. In the end, words and stories (preserved in print and on film) are our only form of immortality, and it is actors who transform these stories into living events and these characters into full, passionate, complex human beings—and by so doing create within us, the audience, a resonance of thought and emotion and perspective. Shakespeare reminds us that "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" (2.7)—and actors like Streep reveal to us what exquisite, complicated, flawed, heroic characters we really are.

WORKS CITED

Bogart, Anne. "Stereotype." *Writing the Essay: Art in the World, The World Through Art*. Ed. Darlene A. Forrest, Randy Martin with Pat C. Hoy II. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007. 523-31.

The Devil Wears Prada. Dir. David Frankel. Perf. Meryl Streep. Fox 2000, 2006.

Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Writing the Essay: Art in the World*, *The World Through Art*. Ed. Darlene A. Forrest, Randy Martin with Pat C. Hoy II. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007. 505-10.

Kramer vs. Kramer. Dir. Robert Benton. Perf. Meryl Streep. Columbia, 1979.

Music of the Heart. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Meryl Streep. Craven-Maddalena, 1999.

Out of Africa. Dir. Sydney Pollack. Perf. Meryl Streep. Mirage, 1985.

Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. 1598-60. Ed. Juliet Dusinberre. London: Arden, 2006.

Sophie's Choice. Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Perf. Meryl Streep. Universal, 1982.

Stanislavski, Constantin. *An Actor Prepares*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Streep, Meryl. "The Ken Burns Interview." *USA Weekend.com.* 1 Dec. 2002.

28 Apr. 2008 <http://www.usaweekend.com/02_issues/021201/021201streep.html>.