Essays – *peer-reviewed*
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0563/18469
ZoneModa Journal. Vol.13 n.2 (2023)
ISSN 2611-0563

Barbara Stanwyck's Grey Hair

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Published: December 2●, 2●23

Abstract

Unlike many Hollywood stars of her generation, Barbara Stanwyck extended and diversified her film career during the 1950s by starring in numerous B-series westerns, where her dominant image of independent, tough woman, questioned the limits of gender and genre. Postwar Hollywood production system changed and veteran film stars were less in demand. This paper aims to investigate the role of Barbara Stanwick as "mature women's role model". If it is true that her maturity, emphasized by premature gray hair and the refusal to dye them, influenced her roles and transformed her into a model for mature women, aging certainly not helped fostering her film career. As the scholar Susan Hayward states, "aging is too real — not the 'real we want to see' " (1996, p. 340). Moreover, Stanwyck's fascination with the western genre is consistent with his image as a mature woman with Republican tendencies. In 1973, she was the first woman to be included in the "Hall of Fame of Great Western Performers" at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum.

Keywords: Hollywood Stardom; Gender and Ageing; Emotional Acting; Models of Womanhood; Glamourizing Ageing.

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> "For a young queer growing up in stifling 1950s and 1960s Brisbane (the Australian city closest to 'redneck' in US-speak), the arrival of television in 1958 was a breath of fresh hair. ... Later at night, I would watch Barbara Stanwick, consumptive, abed in satin, fearful but excited by the telephone and its soon-to-arrive caller (*Sorry, Wrong Number*, Livak, 1948). When would I get a call? Who would be my visitor?"
> (Gary W. Dowsett *'And next, just for your enjoyment!': sex, technology and the constitution of desire*)

Introduction

Barbara Stanwyck (1907–1990) is carved into the Mount Rushmore of Hollywood actresses. The film director Frank Capra once said: "In a Hollywood popularity contest she would win first prize hands down."[1] And yet, Barbara Stanwyck — contrary to common stardom perceptions — bleached her hair just once, for the lead in 1937's *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), a film so popular it spawned a radio soap opera that ran for two decades. According to her biographer Catherine Russell, during the filming, her hairdresser Holly Barnes was on strike and the beauty school students the studio brought in damaged Stanwick's hair with peroxide. After that, she preferred wigs. For what is arguably the greatest noir film ever made — *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) —, director Billy Wilder opted to slap a cheap wig on his beautiful star. On viewing the film's rushes, Paramount production head Buddy DeSylva remarked of Barbara Stanwyck's blonde wig: "We hired Barbara Stanwyck, and here we get George Washington."[2]

Figure 1: Screen shot taken from *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944).

Anyway, that wig was the only thing cheap about Stanwyck in 1944, as she was named the highest earning woman in the land, raking in $400,000 that year. To put that in perspective, that's approximately $6.9 million in today's cash. Though she was everything from a dancer to a femme fatale, Stanwyck

1. Frank Capra, *Frank Capra: The Name Above the Title. An Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 114.
2. Ella Smith, *Starring Miss Barbara Stanwick* (New York: Crown, 1985), 170.

was a cowgirl at heart. She requested no funeral and no burial upon her death. Instead, her ashes were scattered over Lone Pine, the rustic setting for dozens of Hollywood Westerns.

This paper suggests that Stanwyck's decision to stay grey, at a relatively young age — which made her a Hollywood unicorn — besides being, in star studies scholar Richard Dyer's terms, a relevant sign of her star image — helped her to negotiate and navigate star ageing implications in the shifting post-war mediascape. Since Stanwyck's film career is huge, this paper will focus on its main turning points. A historical approach will be taken into account that consider stars not just as images but also as part of a film's production process and culture as a whole.

Historically, one thing that set Stanwyck apart from other contemporary Hollywood stars — and makes her case relevant in the history of the fraught relationship between fashion and women's "ageing" — was her ambivalent relationship with glamour. When it comes to looking marvelous in clothes, on or off the screen, spectators were more apt to think of Joan Crawford or Bette Davis. Unlike many of the female stars of her generation that were forced to end their careers in the 1950s, Stanwyck extended her film career until well into the 1960s by performing in B-Westerns and television series. Her maturity and visible "ageing" affected the roles she played but they also turned Stanwyck into a role model for mature women, while glamorizing "ageing" itself.

Hollywood's female star images were created, promoted, and sold to the public. Besides offering models of womanhood, Stanwick held a position as a female star in the male-controlled film industry, and her image shifted from the start of her career in 1930 until her final television performance in a continuing-character series in 1969. This paper takes a different look at star studies, as they are conventionally approached within the discipline of film studies. In this paper, a historical approach is used that examines stars not just as 'images' but also as part of a film's production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption process. The historical approach is used to develop the dominant approach of examining stars as images. An understanding of the historical and industrial processes behind the construction of star images provides a better knowledge of the fashionability of stars. In writing this paper I therefore relied on materials found in various papers, fan magazines, and newspapers. The analysis of these materials demonstrates the relationship between Stanwyck's image and the cultural and industrial events or trends of the time by locating the image in its original context.

A star image is generally considered as a cluster of signs and meanings that circulate across and outside of films. According to Richard Dyer, these images are highly manipulated texts that have been fabricated. A star can therefore only be known through media texts such as films, fan magazines, papers, etc. A star image encompasses various distinct "identities" such as the "real" biographical person (i.e. Stanwyck was born Ruby Stevens), the performer (who uses his or her expertise to impersonate a character), the type that the star plays across films (i.e. the "gutsy, self-reliant" women Stanwyck played), and the characters (i.e. Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*).

One of the attractions of a star image is the search for the "real person" behind the media-constructed façade but, according to Dyer, it is impossible to know this "real person."[3] Consequently, when discussing a star's off-screen life, for example, this refers to a mediated discourse about what the star does when he or she is not performing in a film. A star's private life should therefore be considered the star's *public* private life.

In Stanwyck's long career in the public eye it is possible to see shifting perspectives of female identity and shifts in image. She achieved prominence in 1930 as a film star and her film career lasted until 1964, after which she continued a healthy career in television. The length of her career is intriguing, as well as Stanwyck's continuous popularity enjoyed over several decades and her serene transition from film to television.

Stanwyck was also one of the first female performers to become freelance. This means that, more than contract stars, Stanwyck had to be more conscious of her image, but she would also have had more freedom to change it. Unlike most female film stars of her generation, Stanwyck was hardly ever promoted

3. Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 1.

as glamorous or costumed in gowns that took attention away from her performance. More importantly, whereas Stanwyck was arguably as big a star as Bette Davis or Joan Crawford, less attention is paid to Stanwyck's image and fashionability. Unlike Stanwick, Davis and Crawford were consciously fabricated as fashion icons with the help of, respectively, the great costume designers Orry-Kelly and Adrian, who took care of their on- and off-screen wardrobes under the watchful eyes of the studios.

Stanwick's Shifting Career

From 1930 to 1934, Stanwyck was under contract to two studios simultaneously: Columbia and Warner Bros. During this period both studios created Stanwyck's unique identity and the core elements of Stanwyck's image were established: in reviews of and publicity for her early films, Stanwyck was variously named a "natural actress," an "emotional actress," and a "dramatic actress." Since the "New Woman" of the 1920s, it was normal for young women to work between graduating from college and getting married.[4] There was, however, a sexual division of labor. Traditional women's work included domestic service, farm labor, and teaching. In the 1930s women also increasingly took on white-collar jobs such as secretary, typist, sales person, and journalist.[5] This is addressed in the popular working-girl films which featured secretaries and sales girls as their heroines: *Working Girls* (Dorothy Arzner, 1931), *Three on a Match* (Mervin LeRoy, 1932) *Wife vs. Secretary* (Clarence Brown, 1936). While women were allowed to work in films, most films told women that "their only acceptable roles lay in marriage, family, and deference to men."[6] Therefore, female characters were often placed in supportive roles that ensured that the goals of Roosevelt's New Deal were met.[7] Female support, both on- and off-screen, was considered "key to male confidence" in these hard times.[8]

According to Robert Sklar, "Hollywood divided its enormous powers of persuasion to preserving the basic moral, social and economic tenets of traditional American culture."[9] During the 1930s, films provided cheap family entertainment and the average weekly film audience reached a record 85 million.[10] While women were expected to conform to the traditional ideal of woman, they were also encouraged to be glamorous. According to *Life* magazine, the "uncivilized" and "unabashed slut" of the 1920s was replaced in the 1930s by the "glamour girl."[11] This girl was to "resemble as closely as possible the archetypal model represented by the leading movie actresses and the girls who pose in fashion ads."[12] Films and fan magazines became trendsetters for women's fashion. Fashion layouts became regular features in fan magazines, and department stores stocked copies of the fashions worn in films.[13] Similarly, stars endorsed cosmetics (particularly LUX soap and Max Factor make-up), which were often cheaper and thus more accessible to Depression-era women.

4. Leila Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939–1945* (Princeton: Princeton UP, l978), 54.
5. Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 24
6. Ware, 180, 183.
7. John Bodnar, *Blue–Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2003), 26.
8. Bodnar, 26
9. Robert Sklar, *Movie–Made America* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 175.
10. Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Enterprise, 1930–1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 2.
11. Winthrop Sargeant, "Fifty Years of American Women," *Life*, January 2, 1950, 64–67, 66–67.
12. Winthrop, 67.
13. Charles Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 30–39, 33–34.

Figure 2: Lux soap advertisement.

During the Depression, Columbia studio turned out mostly B pictures and double-bill features. The studio used standard story formulas that lent themselves to economical film production, and it often re-made cheaper versions of previous A films.[14] Frank Capra joined the studio as a director in 1927 and was quickly assigned to direct the studio's occasional A film. In response to his success — *The Younger Generation* (1929), *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), *Rain or Shine* (1930) — Columbia created the "Capra unit" on its lot in 1932.[15] His film *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), which stars Stanwyck, was chosen as the first feature to be shown at the lavish new Radio City Music Hall in New York.[16] After his success with *It Happened One Night* (1934), Capra received top billing for his Columbia films, with his name famously appeared above the title.

According to Bernard Dick, Capra was the person who "gave Columbia stature."[17] While MGM — generally known to have "more stars than there are in heaven" — usually promoted multiple films in one advert, Columbia publicized one film per advertisement. As a result, Joan Crawford would be named as the star of a certain film in a list of four or five films, whereas Stanwyck would be featured in a one-page advertisement for a particular Capra film, which gave her and Capra better exposure. Particularly during the Depression, Capra's films about the hopes and fears of the individual American attracted large audiences. Capra's work of the early 1930s depicted inequalities and conflicts in human relations

14. Tino Balio, "Columbia Pictures: The Making of a Motion Picture Major, 1930–1943," in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1996), 419–433, 421–422.

15. Thomas Schatz, "Anatomy of a House Director," in *Frank Capra: Authorship and the Studio System*, ed. Robert Sklar and Vito Zagarrio (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998), 10–36, 21.

16. Tonio Balio, "Columbia Pictures", 426.

17. Balio, 9.

and the audience was shown "glimpses of the impossible or the forbidden without upsetting conventional values or beliefs..."[18] Charles Maland describes the viewing–experience of audiences watching Capra's films of the early 1930s as having "gone through an intellectual-emotional-psychological experience that includes the depiction of very real cultural conflicts and the affirmation of an ideological perspective compelling to large numbers of Americans..."[19] Capra noted that, in this period, his stories "must have interesting characters who are human and do human things.... The cast must be the nearest approach in real life to the characters they are to portray."[20]

In her films with Capra, Stanwyck portrayed women whose "hardened exterior serves as a protective covering for [their] basic tenderness."[21] According to Sklar, Stanwyck's performances in Capra's films were "central aspects of Capra's representation of 1920s–era American culture and society."[22] He also notes that Capra's heroines were "figures on the social margin."[23] They were independent women who wanted to change their social status, but were nearly always hampered by boundaries of class or by conventional morality, but had warmth and optimism. Usually, the female protagonists were redeemed by a man who saw something in the woman that nobody had seen before.

Early 1930s: Emotional, Natural Acting

Stanwyck's acting style in these screen vehicles attracted the attention of critics and studios alike. Stanwyck was variously named a "natural actress," an "emotional actress," and a "dramatic actress." An advertisement in *Variety* for the film *Shopworn* (Nicholas Grinde, 1932) promoted Stanwyck as: "Columbia 'natural' [who] is attracting big play-dates by the dozen [...]. Stanwyck's emotional masterpiece!"

In his autobiography, Capra defined Stanwyck as a "natural" actress, a "primitive emotional" who "could grab your heart and tear it to pieces."[24] This means that, as a natural actress, Stanwyck did not calculate or work out her performance, but seemingly "lives the part" or acts "by instinct."[25] There is a lack of ostensible acting technique. Capra noted that Stanwyck's "best work is the result not of timing and rehearsing and study, but of pure feminine reaction."[26] Stanwyck's characters thus reacted "naturally" in emotional situations in her films; "natural" being the way the audience expected real-life people to behave in a similar situation.

Many reviews called Stanwyck's performances "sincere" and "real." These terms were also applied to her off-screen life. Articles in fan magazines described Stanwyck as an "honest person" who had "escaped going Hollywood," and who was "most forthright and outspoken" and had "made a cult of sincerity." Her natural acting style fueled the idea that Stanwyck was "authentic" as a star. According to Dyer, an important component of Hollywood stars is that they often embody the "rhetoric of authenticity," which means that "[s]tars must be what they seem to be, his/her performance is seen as an expression of his/her true self."[27] Authenticity is generated by the ordinary/extraordinary dialectic in a star image.

18. Robert Sklar, *Movie–Made America*, 209, 206.
19. Sklar, 85.
20. Frank Capra, "I Break All Rules," *Film Pictorial*, October 16, 1937, 15.
21. Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (London: Faber, 1992), 163.
22. Robert Sklar, "A Leap into the Void: Frank Capra's Apprenticeship to Ideology," in *Frank Capra: Authorship and the Studio System*, ed. Robert Sklar and Vito Zagarrio (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998), 37–63, 42. The essay focuses on pre–1934 Capra film production. According to the film historian, Stanwick's performances in *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), *The Miracle Woman* (1931), and *Forbidden* (1932) are fundamental in Capra's pre–1934 underexplored representation of 1920s American ethos.
23. Sklar, 43.
24. Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography*, (New York: Da Capo, 1997), 115.
25. Ella Smith, *Starring Miss Barbara Stanwyck* (New York: Crown, 1985), 20, 22.
26. Quoted in Smith, 20.
27. Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 21.

The star's ordinariness (being one of us, being "real") comes through his or her image, indicating his or her authenticity. The combination of Stanwyck's natural acting method, the articles about her off-screen naturalness (i.e. down-to-earth, sincere), and her lack of glamour — glamour is usually associated with Hollywood — contributed to the idea that Stanwyck was ordinary and natural, that she was off-screen what she seemed to be onscreen.

This naturalness was also derived from Stanwyck's lack of class affectation: publicity biographies and articles from this period regularly referred to Stanwyck's lower-class background. Her official biographies — compiled by her PR agent Helen Ferguson — mention that Stanwyck was orphaned at the age of four and that she "is straightforward" and "sincere." Fan magazines, however, drew attention to Stanwyck's "awful" childhood. For example, one article noted that "Brooklyn's little Ruby Stevens [...] had to claw her way to success, taking punishment all the way," while another reported that Stanwyck was "born in the gutter and brought up in circumstances of hardship."[28] Similarly, Stanwyck's mode of behavior and speech depicted her lower-class associations. Articles described her as "hot-tempered," and she told a reporter: "Don't tell me that I should control my temper. I know I should. But sometimes I can't."[29] In an interview in 1933, Stanwyck recalled that "a woman interviewer asked one day why Fay wouldn't let me use [make-up]... I just socked her in the nose. Another dame wanted to know if...Fay wouldn't let me wear high heels. I socked her too."[30] Stanwyck replied to the question whether she had threatened to "black the eye of a famous columnist": "I did and the threat still holds good."[31] Stanwyck was thus promoted as lower-class 'natural' rather than glamorous.

There was a high degree of correspondence between Stanwyck's onscreen and off-screen images. Many of her characters were lower-class, most notably in their appearance and Stanwyck was often applauded for foregoing make-up (*The Plough and the Stars*, John Ford, 1937).[32] A reader's letter in *Photoplay* of January 1932 showed appreciation for Stanwyck as a non-glamour star: "Barbara Stanwyck is not so beautiful and glamorous and waxlike."[33] Glamour had not been a part of Stanwyck's life before she became a film star and it did not fit with the image that Stanwyck was "natural" and from a lower-class background. She could therefore frequently be unglamorous onscreen without it damaging her image.

Consequently, there is a particular "fit" between the characters Stanwyck played in Capra's films, her acting method ("what would I do in such a situation?"), and her lower-class background. Vsevolod Pudovkin argued that "the relationship between the proposed image [the character] and the actor as a live person is particularly strong at the beginning of his work."[34] This is certainly true for Stanwyck. Occasionally, there is still a correspondence between her character and her off-screen life in her later career: her roles as a burlesque dancer in *Ball of Fire* (Howard Hawks, 1942) and *Lady of Burlesque* (William A. Wellman, 1943) recall Stanwyck's early career as a hoofer on Broadway. In Stanwyck's films with Capra, Stanwyck could draw from her own experiences of independence and hardship to portray her characters, which were usually tough, hard-boiled dames with a soft core who sought romantic fulfilment. For example, in *Shopworn* Stanwyck plays Kitty Lane, a poor waitress who falls in love with a wealthy young man but has to fight his family to find happiness. In *The Purchase Price* (William A. Wellman, 1932) she plays Joan Gordon, a nightclub singer who leaves her romance with a gangster to become a mail-order bride to a small-town farmer. In *Ladies They Talk About* (William Keighley and Howard Bretherton, 1933) Stanwyck plays Nan, a lady bank robber who is sent to prison after her confessions to a priest and tries to revenge him when she gets out, but falls in love with him instead.

28. Max Breen, "Real–Life Girl," *Picturegoer*, February 2, 1937, 13, 13.

29. Martha Kerr, "Barbara's Back!", *Modern Screen*, February, 1936, 43, 43.

30. Actor Frank Fay and Barbara Stanwick were married on August 26, 1928.

31. James Fiddler and Barbara Stanwyck, "Barbara Stanwyck Answers Twenty Timely Questions," *Movie Classic*, June, 1933, 22.

32. AFI (American Film Institute), *Barbara Stanwyck: AFI Life Achievement Award* (Los Angeles: AFI, 1987), 35.

33. Bessie Krazok, Letter, *Photoplay,* January, 1932, 10.

34. Vsevolod Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting* (London: Vision, 1958), 240.

These roles were an outlet for what critics called Stanwyck's "emotional acting" ability.[35] Underneath a one-page portrait in *Photoplay* of September 1930, the by-line reads:

> Probably the most highly praised young actress of the last few months — Barbara Stanwyck, who shot to *emotional stardom* on the strength of her unforgettably beautiful and moving performance in *Ladies of Leisure*. This office is bombarded with letters praising her beauty and acting power.[36]

Other articles mentioned that Stanwyck "does not rely on make-up to convey the illusion of age. Her every movement and gesture do that to perfection."[37] And while reviews for *Ladies of Leisure* were mixed, *Variety* noted that Stanwyck saved the picture with "her ability to convince in heavy emotional scenes."[38] In 1933, a *Variety* reviewer noted that all Stanwyck's films were expected to have a moment in which Stanwyck could "blow up in a shattering emotional scene."[39] Indeed, many of her films often have only one scene that includes an emotional outburst by Stanwyck.

Another indication of the persistent association between Stanwyck and a certain form of emotional display is the fact that fifteen years after she left Columbia, Harry Cohn, president of the studio, asked for a "Stanwyck scene" to be included in Max Ophuls's *The Reckless Moment* (1949).[40] In his book *Max Ophuls in the Hollywood Studios*, which includes this reference, Lutz Bacher describes a "Stanwyck scene" as a "strong" scene, a "more overtly emotional scene."[41] This suggests that, for Cohn, Stanwyck was a byword for a mode of emotional showcasing.

Stanwyck's "emotional" acting is part of her style of underplaying emotions. This is obvious when one compares Stanwyck's style to Bette Davis's histrionics, at their best in *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942) and *The Little Foxes* (1941). Davis often used her whole body to convey an intense emotion, she used arms and torso, constantly moving them. Possibly because Davis was trained as a dancer, she was able to use her body in such an expressive way to convey her emotions.[42] Martin Shingler argues that Davis concentrated her performance "specifically on the movements and tensions of her shoulders, torso, hips and arms."[43] It is difficult — sometimes even impossible, because of Davis's fast movements — to read emotions from her face alone. If her emotions can be read, they are conveyed in a prototypical way. Stanwyck's emotions show in her face and in the absence of gesticulatory movements. She primarily uses her face, voice, shoulders and arms. Moreover, she uses her shoulders and arms only if she physically has to defend herself, almost never, like Davis, as a "culturally transmitted gesture" or a pantomime style pose.[44]

35. Mordaunt Hall, "Miss Stanwick Triumphs," *New York Times*, May 24, 1930, 35.

36. Richard Griffith, *The Talkies Articles and Illustrations from Photoplay Magazine 1928–1940* (New York: Dover, 1971), 19.

37. Lionel Collier, "On the Screens Now," *Picturegoer*, October 29, 1932, 19–20, 20.

38. Mordaunt Hall, "Miss Stanwick Triumphs," 35.

39. Cecilia Ager, "Going Places," *Variety*, February 23, 1933, 43.

40. Lutz Bacher, *Max Ophuls in the Hollywood Studios*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1996), 308–309.

41. Bacher, 308.

42. Ed Sikov, *Dark Victory: The Life of Bette Davis* (London: Aurum, 2007), 26–27, 29.

43. Martin Shingler, "Bette Davis: Malevolence in Motion," in *Screen Acting*, ed. Peter Krämer and Alan Lovell (London: Routledge, 1999), 46–58, 49.

44. James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: U of California, 1988), 63.

Figure 3: Screen shot taken from *Lady of Leisure* (Frank Capra, 1930) where Key expresses conflicting emotions.

A fan magazine article from 1936 states that Stanwyck's acting "fascinates because of sincerity and complete absence of studied effects." Although the concept of "studied effects" is not explained, it seems to refer to the gesticulatory movements or prototypical facial expressions that were often used in theatre and in silent film.[45] In an article for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1987, Stanwyck explained that she primarily used her eyes in screen acting, rather than mannerisms she used in the theatre: "Mr. Capra taught me that. I mean, sure, it's nice to say very nice dialogue, if you can get it. But great moving acting [...]. Watch the eyes."[46]

The Late 1930s: Freelancing

Since the 1930s, Stanwyck's acting ability played a major part in her popularity, as is suggested by later reviews of her films, which nearly always refer to her acting. Despite the importance of acting, and connotations of natural and lower-class in Stanwyck's image, these were not the only themes that were foregrounded in this period. For instance, *So Big*, directed by William A. Wellman in 1932, was a maternal drama based on the novel by Edna Ferber — who also wrote *Show Boat* and *Stage Door*. Performing in a literary adaptation of a Pulitzer-Prize novel gave Stanwyck's image a status boost. In the film, Stanwyck plays a farmer's widow who works her farm so that her son can have an education. *So Big* provided Stanwyck with an opportunity to play a sacrificial mother rather than a bad girl or a fallen woman, as well as the challenge of ageing on screen. Many reviews mention that Stanwyck in this movie "does not rely on make-up to convey the illusion of age. Her every movement and gesture do that to perfection," suggesting not just the idea of ageing as performance and masquerade, but also the fact that image is a

45. David Mayer, "Acting in Silent Film: Which Legacy of the Theatre?", in *Screen Acting*, ed. Peter Krämer and Alan Lovell (London: Routledge, 1999), 10–30, 11.

46. Paul Rosenfield, "Saluting Stanwyck: A Life on Film," *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1987, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-04-05-ca-22-story.html.

lie.[47]

In 1935, after divorcing from the vaudeville star Frank Fay, she started a new path in her career as a freelancer. Emily Carman argues that fan magazines "underscored an *independent stardom* in their discussions of the [life] of Stanwyck..."[48] Carman goes on to note that the "unconventional" lifestyles of female stars created "an image of feminine individuality rather than domesticity."[49] Nevertheless, the focus on Stanwyck's divorce and independence rather than on her family life means that, in the late 1930s, Stanwyck's off-screen life could be indirectly labelled un-domestic and even unfeminine. By broadening her range of performances, Stanwyck made herself available to studios as a versatile actress who could play in different genres.

The themes that made up Stanwyck's star image in the 1930s (acting, natural, and un-domestic) were still present in the 1940s. According to a 1944 article in *Variety*, female stars of Stanwyck's generation were getting "old," but because of the high demand for "top older" female stars in this period these stars could ask up to $250,000 per film.[50] The article identified Bette Davis, Ann Sheridan, Olivia de Havilland, Claudette Colbert, Katharine Hepburn, and Hedy Lamarr as "top older" contract stars, and Stanwyck as the "most important [older] femme star on the freelance list."[51] During the second half of 1940s this cohort of "older" female stars was followed by a younger generation of actresses who achieved stardom in the 1940s such as Lauren Bacall and Veronica Lake. The older generation "share[d] an aura of strength, perseverance, and verbal facility," and few of their films had "pin-up shots". Mature actresses expressed "strong sensuality," "more controlled and self-directed than the more tawdry or sultry appeal of a Rita Hayworth or Betty Grable."[52] Nonetheless, both generations' stars were in high demand, during the war.

In his article *The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window*, Charles Eckert argues that Hollywood films provided "living display windows [...]; occupied by marvelous mannequins and swathed in a fetish-inducing ambiance of music and emotion."[53] Women's pictures were a convenient vehicle to display fashion. During the war, fashion symbolized women's increased freedom and mobility; clothes were simplified and comfortable.[54] At the same time, the government actively promoted the idea that women should be feminine and glamorous.[55] During the war a woman's hairstyle was a signifier of her social position and an indication of her desire for glamour. Molly Haskell emphasizes the use of long hair in 1940s "dark melodramas," and argues that for women, long hair was "the equivalent of a gun..."[56] Moreover, for women who worked in the factories, long hair became a safety hazard and women were warned not to copy Veronica Lake's popular peek-a-boo hairstyle. There was a tension between fashion (long curls) and duty (hiding the long curls). In fact, closer to the end of the war, women's hair got shorter, possibly because the time-consuming hairdos were no longer practical. This change from glamorous in the early years to practical in the later years is visible in Stanwyck's image. In the early war years Stanwyck suddenly became fashionable and glamorous. While the Hollywood film industry thrived on this notion of glamour, Stanwyck's 1930s image had been the opposite of glamorous. Stanwyck was not a conventional Hollywood beauty and many critics discussed her appeal to both men and women as resulting from her acting skills, her charm, and her down-to-earthness rather than beauty.

47. Lionel Collier, "On the Screens Now," 20.

48. Emily Susan Carman, "Independent Stardom: Female Film Stars and the Studio System in the 1930s," *Women's Studies*, Vol. 37 (2008): 583–615, 587.

49. Carman, 587.

50. "Femme Star Costs up 100%," *Variety*, March 8, 1944, 1, 55, 1.

51. "Femme Star Costs up 100%", 55.

52. "Femme Star Costs up 100%", 28.

53. Charles Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," 35.

54. Susan Hartman, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 195.

55. Michael Renov, *Hollywood's Wartime Women: Representation and Ideology* (Ann Harbor: UMI, 1988), 64.

56. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (London: New English Library, 1974), 191.

In 1939, the union between Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck made them an idealized couple and Stanwyck became an idealized version of a wife. The media called *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941) a turning point in Stanwyck's image regarding glamour. The film was both Paramount costume designer Edith Head's and Stanwyck's first fashion picture, and it was the biggest transition in Stanwyck's costuming. The article "Barbara gets Beautified" in *Picturegoer* in 1941 drew particular attention to the changes in Stanwyck's costumes for *The Lady Eve*, comparing them to the "rough pioneering dress or plain tailored suits, so often used in typical Stanwyck pictures."[57] A glamorous element was added, but the addition of glamour did not clash with the already existing element of natural. During the first half of the 1940s, elements of glamour and natural co-existed in Stanwyck's image, but when Taylor entered the Navy in 1943 the glamorous image faded into the background. Apparently Stanwyck's glamorization into a wife was not as durable as her star status, because from the mid-1940s onward publicity focused predominantly on her career.

Cattle Queen of Hollywood-land

"When Barbara strips off her petticoats and straps on her guns" is the tag line for Stanwyck's 1954 film *Cattle Queen of Montana* (Allan Dwan, 1954) and it indicates one of the major shifts that took place in Stanwyck's career and image in the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike many of the female stars of her generation, Stanwyck "stripped off her petticoats" and extended her film career by performing in numerous B Westerns where strong, female roles were uncommon until the post-war era. Stanwyck's dominant image as a tough, independent woman was particularly useful in Westerns where Stanwyck's characters pushed gender boundaries in this traditionally male genre. Stanwyck was one of the few actresses who successfully played strong women that were equal to the male heroes of the genre. The popularity of the Western and her personal interest in the genre enabled Stanwyck to perform in a large number of Westerns. It is for these Western roles that Stanwyck is mostly remembered today. Because Stanwyck was a regular, but, as a woman somewhat unusual, appearance in the Western, much of the publicity surrounding Stanwyck at this time focused on her love for the genre and the quality of her work in these films.

Although Stanwyck was able to extend her career by performing in B Westerns, many other mature female stars were forced to end their careers in the 1950s because there were insufficient parts for mature women. This was a result of shifts in the Hollywood film industry. Another problem with star-ageing is that make-up artists ran into various "problems" with the older stars, most notably wrinkles and greying hair. In *An Historical, Philosophical, and Practical Essay on the Human Hair*, inscribed to Her Royal Highness the princess Charlotte of Wales and Cobourg in 1816, the author Alexander Rowland, Jr. makes clear that "grey hair is the appendage of the old age."[58] They are associated with pain and death:

> grey hair is a disease of the hair, and is caused by the putrefaction of the natural moisture; consequently it becomes white. The natural moisture exhaling to the surface, but still of a different kind, the white hair receives its nourishment, which is the cause of its growing. If it is asked-How does grey hair grow? I answer, it grows from this moisture, but it is not of the nature of other hair.[59]

Greying hair, though his discourse is not marked by gender, is constantly interweaved with notions of disease, putrefaction, and plain horror:

> the cause of this putrefaction taking place is in consequence of illness, violent fevers, accouchements, excessive grief, great anxiety, intense thinking, close attention to study, vio-

57. W.H.M., "Barbara Gets Beautified," *Picturegoer*, July 12, 1941, 9.

58. Alexander Rowland Jr, *An Historical, Philosophical and Practical Essay on the Human Hair* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones: 1816), 34.

59. Rowland Jr, 32.

> lent exercise, and anything which tends to injure the natural moisture of the body. The head always receives the injury first.[60]

According to the author, men are more subject to grey hair than women because of study and anxiety. Grey hair is not only linked to disease and men, but also to time accelerating its natural course, to growing old fast:

> when grey hair appears at an early period of life, it must arise from some cause, perhaps imperceptible to the person. Sudden fright, fear, anxiety, and other causes, the effects of which will change it even in an hour. 'For deadly fear can time outgo, and blaunch at once the hair (Walter Scott's Marmion, Canto 1).[61]

For example, according to the author, queen of France Marie Antoinette's beautiful tresses turned grey while she was confined in the prison of the Conciergerie, sacrificed "to the fury of the rulers of France."[62]

Grey hair was especially a "problem" for Stanwyck, as she went prematurely grey in the 1940s. Studios touched up pictures and stills, but Stanwyck refused to dye her hair. As hostess for The Barbara Stanwyck Show in 1961, Stanwyck drew attention to her hair in the closing sequence of the episode *Frightened Doll*: "Some of my friends say I should go back to [my natural hair colour]. Why should I? It's just prematurely gray, that's all."[63] Similarly, an article about *Clash by Night* (Fritz Lang, 1952) noted that Stanwyck "never dyed her hair to look younger since it started to gray 15 years ago." The press book for *The Great Man's Lady* (William A. Wellman, 1942) already mentioned Stanwyck's greying hair and her refusal to dye it in the article "Graying Hair No Handicap to Glamour," adding that when Stanwyck wears three pronounced grey streaks in the film "she is at her most glamorous in the entire film." Stanwyck's standard biography even noted in the late 1940s that she was turning grey, "which she makes no attempt to hide." The grey hair thus became part of Stanwyck's image.

When Stanwyck signed with glamour studio MGM in 1948, MGM's head designer Irene supposedly decreed that the long greying hair had to go because "no actress can have white hair. No one wants to make love to a gray-haired lady. [...] To be over forty isn't possible [in Hollywood]."[64] The short haircut emphasized Stanwyck's hair color, but she still refused to dye it because she had no desire to hide her age. Although Stanwyck's grey hair looked blonde in black and white films, for her color films she was supplied with red or blonde wigs. Apparently film producers and make-up designers agreed with Irene, and Stanwyck's grey hair was covered-up. She was the only Hollywood glamour star with grey hair and refused to do anything about it.

Her snowy white hair became Stanwyck's trademark in the final stages of her career. Because Stanwyck did not hide her age, she was apparently considered a suitable model to advice female audiences about maturity. There is a notable increase in articles detailing Stanwyck's advice for mature women in the 1950s. In various articles Stanwyck commented on the pros of getting older, and gave beauty and dietary advice. Stanwyck also explained how she "stayed so slim" at her age: "I watch my food and I don't diet." Journalist Lydia Lane published a series of articles for the *Los Angeles Times* in which she used Stanwyck as a mature role model. One of the articles argued that Stanwyck could "get away with gray hair because she has such a young face and little girl sheen to her skin."[65] Greying hair was indicative not so much of her age as of her honesty, a physical quality being turned into a moral one, meaning "being true to one's age."

60. Rowland Jr, 32.

61. Rowland Jr, 33.

62. Rowland Jr, 34.

63. The Barbara Stanwick Show, *The Frightened Doll*, 1961, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T66eZl9FpLI&list=PLoNzFeroyJUlaX1aT-r-A2kw3CxT_dOnt&index=13.

64. Jack Holland, "I Want to Remember," *Movieland*, July, 1948, 61, 76–8.

65. Quoted in Sabrina Qiong Yu, *Revisiting Star Studies: Cultures, Themes and Methods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017), 151.

Although Stanwyck was used as role model for mature women, the obvious ageing did not help her career. Films particularly aimed at a young audience starred new stars such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Marlon Brando. *Roustabout* (John Rich, 1964) is Stanwyck's only youth film. Teaming Stanwyck with with rock and roll idol Elvis Presley was a smart move because it gave him credence as an actor. Edith Head costumed Stanwyck in jeans, an unusual style for a woman in her late fifties as jeans were usually associated with youth, but the jeans made Stanwyck look younger and tougher. According to David Thomson, women in the classical Western "are there as stooges or excuses. They are allowed to die, or worse; they are placid smiling, an obedient reward when ordeal is over."[66] However, this traditional account of the woman in the Western does not fit many of Stanwyck's roles in Westerns where the plot focuses, or gives much room to, a female perspective. Stanwyck's unfeminine Western female protagonists are often positioned as the hero: they wear masculine clothing (slacks, boots, spurs), ride and shoot as well as any male hero, and are regularly involved in vigorous physical activity. Stanwyck's characters are often shot from a low angle, which not only emphasizes their power but also underlines that a powerful woman in this context is rather unusual.

Forever Old

While it is worth noting that naturalness and authenticity were linked to emotional acting of a cinematic kind, despite claims of authenticity, naturalness, and emotional acting, these characteristics are not natural but influenced by culture, industry and media practices. A star's body is always a construction of some kind, a result of human agency and chance. Stanwick held these values closely and insisted — up to a certain point — on a celebrity image that was unadorned, unglamourous, and ordinary. Or, rather, she succeeded in glamorizing ageing. Paradoxically as it may sounds, the more glamorous she became the more she had to promote her ordinariness. In Lux Radio Theatre, for years she advertised Lux toilet soap as a counter–cosmetic product: "It's so foolish to risk the *chocked pores* that cause Cosmetic Skin," read an ad in 1939. Letting her hair go grey was a bold move, to be sure, but her long career was in part sustained through her slender figure and hair. Stanwyck's natural look fitted with her naturally grey hair. The look suggested that, by looking wholesome and healthy, older women could still look young. Several articles noted that Stanwyck predominantly wore "simple, tailored suits," and consequently emphasized Stanwyck's connotations of natural.

During the war years, American women's clothing culture was traversed by a tension being taken care of by the fashion industry. On one hand, women had to work in factories, wearing pants for safety reasons, while regulations prohibited tightness as it would have distracted the men and put their lives at risk. Sex is not a welcomed guest inside the factory. On the other hand, sweater girls as movie stars were an important way for Hollywood to contribute to the war effort. According to Robert B. Westbrook, the US Armed Force involvement in pinup culture was a fundamental element of the ideological project of blending private interests with the public service of wartime commission.

Barbara Stanwick was not a pinup star but Paramount head of costume design Edith Head put her into tight–fitting sweaters and a powerfully erotic ankle bracelet in both the already mentioned *Double Indemnity* and *My Reputation* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1946). "Bullet bras" — as they were called — rendered women's bodies as technologies: less maternal, more stylish. Visually freed from breasts' maternal function. In the case of Stanwick, this allowed her to transition into the more ambiguous, untrustworthy women of film noir. In *My Reputation* her coned tight sweaters are a fashion technique that cancels her status as a mother.

66. Quoted in Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, *The Movie Book of the Western* (London: Studio Vista, 1996), 13.

Figure 4: Screen shot taken from *My Reputation* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1945) where Edith Head put Barbara Stanwick into a bullet sweater.

At 75, many years later, in the television miniseries *Thorn Birds* (1983) she played the manipulative land owner Mary Carson. Though her character is cheaply written and, as a reviewer put it: "10 hours of Richard Chamberlain as a Roman Catholic priest seem like an eternity," Carson's purpose in playing a young woman in a withered body is a perfect match for an acting star who in a way succeeded in staying forever old because, as she said: "only the young dye good."[67]

67. Quoted in Ray Hagen and Laura Wagner, *Killer Tomatoes: Fifteen Tough Film Dames* (London: MacFarland & Company, 2004), 213.

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