

Julia Roberts and *Erin Brockovich*: The cultural and commercial paradoxes of Oscar winning acting

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In his study of the Academy Awards, Emanuel Levy describes the Oscars as ‘an institutionalized yardstick of artistic quality.... a legitimized measure of cinematic excellence’.¹ Amongst the categories honoured, conferment of the Best Actress and Actor awards annually operate as a benchmark of quality for the art of film performance. Yet when considered in the context of Hollywood, the recognition of artistic esteem is always locked into conditions of highly commercialized production where the star operates as a key sign of economic value. This tension between art and commerce creates a fundamental paradox in the status of the Oscars: by celebrating artistic achievements, the awards demonstrate disinterest in the commerce of the market, yet at the same time the awards only take place within a context of production dominated by commercial concerns.

At the 73rd Academy Awards ceremony, the Oscar for Best Actress in a Leading Role went to Julia Roberts for *Erin Brockovich*. As the eponymous heroine, Roberts appeared in the true life tale of a working class single mother employed as a legal assistant who through her own investigations brings a major and successful legal claim against Pacific Gas and Electric after exposing how the company has contaminated the water supply serving the local community of Hinkley. Here I want to use the example of Roberts’s performance as Brockovich to think about how Oscar winning acting negotiates a position for the film actor between artistic legitimacy and commercial success. By giving Roberts the award, the Academy recognized and legitimized her status as an actor of distinction. At the same time, the award came at the end of a decade in which Roberts had become the highest paid and most bankable female star in Hollywood. Initially the chapter discusses the economic value of Roberts’ star power before exploring how the role of Brockovich represented a denial of that status. In particular I want to consider how Roberts’ performance enacted that disavowal. My concern is therefore with how, in Oscar winning acting, the performer’s voice and body negotiates the tension between art and commerce.

The Inverted Economics of the Oscars

For her performance as Brockovich, Roberts was reportedly paid a \$20m salary.² This huge sum came closely on the heels of the \$17m she received for appearing in *Runaway Bride*.³ Since the mid-1990s several A list male stars had commanded salaries of \$20m but with these two payments Roberts set new benchmarks for female stars. In the context of Hollywood’s inflated economics, Roberts’ value made sense: after *Pretty Woman* took over \$178m at the domestic box office in 1990, during the remainder of the decade a further six of her films grossed in excess of \$100m.⁴ By the end of 2000, *Erin Brockovich* had grossed over \$125m at the North American box office and appeared in tenth spot amongst *Variety*’s annual rankings of the most commercially successful films that year.⁵

Hollywood stardom may be largely defined by economic power yet the Academy Awards has maintained a distance from the commercial forces of the film market. Over successive decades the Academy has demonstrated unwillingness to reward economic success. Consequently, awards for the categories of best female or male performance have represented a form of symbolic capital firmly based on an

alternative index of value uncoupled from the film market. For example, in the decade before Roberts received her award, in the Best Actress category Kathy Bates won for *Misery*, Jodie Foster with *The Silence of the Lambs*, Emma Thompson for *Howards End*, Holly Hunter with *The Piano*, Jessica Lange for *Blue Sky*, Susan Sarandon with *Dead Man Walking*, Frances McDormand for *Fargo*, Helen Hunt with *As Good As It Gets*, Gwyneth Paltrow for *Shakespeare in Love*, and Hilary Swank with *Boys Don't Cry*. With the exception of *The Silence of the Lambs*, none of these films featured amongst the top 60 highest grossing movies in the years they were released.⁶

By bestowing esteem on films with limited commercial appeal, the Oscars serve as one example of how cultural production operates by the logic which Pierre Bourdieu conceptualized as an 'economic world reversed', in which acquisition of the symbolic 'profit' of critical prestige is frequently antithetical to the accumulation of financial profit.⁷ However the example of Roberts and *Erin Brockovich* does not altogether fit with this logic. When Roberts won her Oscar, the Academy uncharacteristically granted acclaim to an economically powerful performer appearing in a popular hit. None of the other nominees for best actress that year - Joan Allen in *The Contender*, Juliette Binoche for *Chocolat*, Ellen Burstyn in *Requiem for a Dream*, and Laura Linney with *You Can Count on Me* - commanded anywhere near the same salary level as Roberts and the films they appeared in stood outside the top 100 titles at the annual box office.⁸ When considered in this context, Roberts' win for *Brockovich* appears rather anomalous, for generally, although not absolutely, over the last two decades the Academy has preferred to shun commercial success when bestowing awards. *Erin Brockovich* was one of those rare occasions when the award for Best Actress went to a performance in a film which had enjoyed reasonable commercial success.

According to the inverted economics of the awards system, Roberts' salary and box office value placed her in a sphere of production which on most occasions would be expected to count against her winning an award. Yet by exploring matters of genre and acting, it is possible to see how Roberts' acting disavowed her economic status and thereby legitimized her as a potential award candidate.

Genre and the Oscars

When *Pretty Woman* became a box office hit it established a connection between Roberts and romantic comedy which would endure throughout the next decade. This connection was consolidated when in 1997 *My Best Friend's Wedding* became Roberts' second highest grossing film to that date and she ended the decade with leads in the back-to-back romcoms *Notting Hill* and *Runaway Bride*.

By taking the role of Brockovich, Roberts moved away from this familiar generic ground, resituating herself in the context of a character focused contemporary drama telling the story of one woman's fight against corporate irresponsibility. Roberts departed from the romantic comedies which not only marked the most familiar aspects of her star image but also defined her economic power. Yet although Roberts was so frequently associated with romantic comedies during the 1990s, it should be noted she actually worked across a wide range of different genres, returning only intermittently to romcom. During the decade she appeared in the thrillers *Sleeping with the Enemy*, *The Pelican Brief* and *Conspiracy Theory*, but also starred in the fantasy adventure *Hook*, historical drama *Mary Reilly*, and melodrama *Stepmom*. Generic diversification has therefore characterized Roberts' career, although the legacy of *Pretty Woman* has ensured this variety is usually eclipsed by the familiar image of a romcom star.

At the Oscars, only performances in certain categories of film win nominations and awards while others don't. Levy identifies how the Academy has consistently avoided conferring awards on popular comedies, including romantic comedies.⁹ Over the decade before Roberts' win, the Best Actress award went to performances in films as varied as *The Piano*, *Fargo* and *As Good As It Gets*. Given the strong variations which exist between these films, it would be mistaken to believe there is single type of film preferred by the Academy. Even so, patterns can be found in the types of films privileged by the Academy. Taking both the nominees and winners in the Best Actress category, during the 1990s honoured performances by female leads in adaptations of quality literature, period romances or dramas, portraits of regal figures, and biopics of real life entertainers or artists.¹⁰ In the years immediately preceding Roberts' win, it was these categories which set out the parameters within which performances by female stars were legitimately recognized by the Academy as delivering quality acting.

Generically, *Erin Brockovich* did not fit with these categories. Elements of the film belonged to that seam of production which could be described as the remarkable true life story, a category shared by other films from the 90s featuring Oscar winning performances by female leads, including Hilary Swank in *Boy's Don't Cry* and Charlize Theron in *Monster*. Although frequently exercising considerable artistic license in their telling of actual events, these stories gained artistic standing by having at least a foundation in reality, for a certain degree of prestige comes from telling real, and usually emotionally hard, stories. Stronger associations can be made between *Erin Brockovich* and Oscar nominees or winners from an earlier decade. In the late 70s and into the 80s, the Academy acclaimed lead female performers in a number of dramas which displayed a moral conscience over matters of social or political importance. Nominations were given to Jane Fonda for *The China Syndrome*, Sissy Spacek in *Missing*, Whoopi Goldberg for *The Color Purple*, and Jessica Lange in *Music Box*. Possibly, however, the most direct precursors to Roberts' performance in *Erin Brockovich* came from Sally Field's Oscar winning role in *Norma Rae* and Meryl Streep's nominated performance in *Silkwood*. Like *Erin Brockovich*, both films centred on ordinary women who individually confront corporate power, and as with the case of *Karen Silkwood*, the Brockovich story was based on real events. Brockovich provided a role straddling private and public worlds, combining the familial responsibilities of the single mother-of-three with a crusading drive to seek justice for the poorer social strata. Consistently the film emphasizes it is because of her maternal experience that Brockovich is able to bring a human dimension to the case against PG&E, cutting through the protocols and obfuscations which characterize the legal profession, and enabling her to directly contact with the problems and needs of the Hinkley community. Through this humanitarian sensibility the film therefore appeared to be not only entertainment but also an important tale with wider social resonance.

By taking the role of Brockovich, Roberts' performance was positioned within relations of difference and similarity. By shifting genres, Roberts not only distanced herself from the romantic comedies which had not only defined the most familiar aspects of her star image but also her box office bankability. With her record breaking salary, Roberts may have set new highs for the cost of female talent in Hollywood, yet paradoxically, by removing herself from the world of romantic comedy, she took a role which represented a denial of her economic power. Other genres could have provided opportunities for achieving the same differentiating effect, for example horror or the western, and as already discussed, throughout the 90s Roberts worked

outside romantic comedy by diversifying her generic range. What such choices could not have offered however was the opportunity for Roberts to also take a type of role which linked into a lineage of Academy acclaimed performances by female stars in dramas centred on women valiantly battling against corporate power.

Acting as Brockovich

Erin Brockovich was released in the US nearly a year before the Oscars were awarded, and over the next few months the film was rolled out across international territories. Roberts' performance attracted uniformly positive reviews. When released in Britain, critic Sean Macauley wrote in *The Times* '[b]est of all, the film offers the thrilling spectacle of Julia Roberts doing some real acting for a change'.¹¹ Macauley qualified his assessment by observing '[t]he cutesy naïf schtick which has dogged her ever since *Pretty Woman* has gone'. He continued,

[g]one too is the irritating halo that every film seemed to bestow on Roberts regardless of her character's behaviour (*Runaway Bride* was the worst offender). And gone is the aloofness that dogged her in *Notting Hill*. It's a shock, but a pleasant one: Roberts goes for real and pulls it off.¹²

Similar perceptions of Roberts were shared by Ian Nathan in his review for the popular UK film magazine *Empire*: '[y]our typical Julia Roberts vehicle tends to do what it says on the tin: big budget, romcom shenanigans with that smile, and those legs. Cue: box office jamboree'.¹³ Both Macauley and Nathan praised Roberts' performance for how it departed from the type of behaviour – the 'cutesy naïf schtick', aloofness, smile and foregrounding of her legs – found in the romantic comedies. For both critics, the aesthetic value of Roberts' acting as Brockovich therefore rested on how her performance physically marked a departure from the romantic comedies.

As Barbara Klinger has noted, reviews can provide useful sources for exploring the presumptions implicit in the reception and evaluation of cultural works.¹⁴ Frequently with reviews of film acting, it is the perceived balance between actor and character which is taken as the framework for judgments of aesthetic quality. Nathan continued his review by describing *Erin Brockovich* as 'a superlative character piece where you actually stop thinking that Julia Roberts is, well, Julia Roberts, and immerse yourself in the travails and triumphs of trashy single mum Erin Brockovich and her legal crusade'.¹⁵ Here the performance was praised for how the known star presence of Roberts was regarded as disappearing behind the specificities of character. Implicit in this evaluation is the division which Barry King has drawn between personification and impersonation in film acting.¹⁶ Personification results from how repetitions in the actor's uses of the voice and body foreground the performer as a known and recognisable figure over the particular demands of an individual character. Impersonation on the other hand is the product of discontinuities, in which the voice and body are employed to play particular character qualities. In their evaluations of Roberts' performance as Brockovich, both Macauley and Nathan took the balance between actor and character as the key criterion of value to assess her acting. Both reviews were therefore symptomatic of the commonly held presumption that skill in impersonation is fundamental to quality acting and that performances which foreground the actor over character should be dismissed. By requiring transformation on the part of the actor, impersonation is valued for how it is believed to display the performer's skill in the art of acting. Personification on the other hand ignores the skill of transformation, ensuring the identity of the performer

remains recognizable and known. Furthermore, when considered in the context of the film star system, personification is fundamental to making the performer a marketable entity. If impersonation is based on artistic skill, personification can therefore become the very foundation for a performer becoming a sign of commercial value in the market.

Comparative analysis of Roberts' acting in *Erin Brockovich* and the film she made immediately before this, *Runaway Bride*, serve to illustrate something of these performance principles. Macauley regarded *Runaway Bride* as guilty of creating 'the irritating halo that every film seemed to bestow on Roberts regardless of her character's behaviour'.¹⁷ This observation can best be understood by looking at how the romantic comedies worked to create Roberts as a soft love object, an effect partially achieved through the actor's voice and body. In *Runaway Bride*, Roberts plays Maggie Carpenter, a small town girl with a reputation for repeatedly jilting bridegrooms at the altar. After New York journalist Ike Graham, played by Richard Gere, hears of Maggie's serial evasions, he comes to town to dig up the story on Maggie's avoidance of marriage. Although this causes friction between the two central characters, ultimately they fall in love and eventually marry. *Runaway Bride* is representative of the general tendency in contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy. Emotion is central to contemporary romcom, yet feeling only ever appears to be playful and superficial rather than deep and heartfelt. A world is created in which light emotionality pervades, and rather than any verbal or physical humour, it is this quality of emotional playfulness and lightness which seems to be the main claim to comedy in romcom. It is precisely this emotional register which Roberts' performance as Carpenter delivered. At various points, narrative circumstances give Maggie cause to be annoyed by Ike's intrusions into her life, or otherwise make her apprehensive about marriage, and by the film's conclusion, Maggie has fallen in love with Ike. Yet Roberts' performance sets a tone which ensures annoyance never becomes anger, apprehension avoids becoming anxiety or fear, and love falls short of full blown passion and desire. This tone is achieved through Roberts' voice and body. Her voice keeps an even tone, never becoming abrasively harsh or quietly seductive. Nor does she speak with a rhythm which is fast and urgent or slow and ponderous. This gives Maggie exactly the light quality which doesn't display any intense emotional high spots.

For her performance as Brockovich, Roberts replaced playful lightness with emotional sincerity and authenticity, conveyed through the media of the voice and body. Overall Roberts adopted a harder, sharper vocal register for Brockovich, most evident in the several scenes of outright anger which the character has: she shouts and swears when her claim for injuries from a car crash fails, and is equally aggravated when she argues herself into a job with the lawyer Ed Masry (Albert Finney) or confronts the second legal team which Masry brings on-board to fight the case against PG&E. Physically, at various times in the film she is shown walking with a firm stomping manner, conveying a sense of committed purpose for the character. Both the voice and the walk were justified by narrative circumstances for they gave substance to Brockovich's crusading spirit, but they also differentiated Roberts' performance from the familiar traits of her romcom roles. With the romcom performances, the softness and lightness of Roberts' characters were undoubtedly acted qualities, yet as those traits gave Roberts her most popular and bankable hits, so they came to epitomize the star's familiar on-screen image: they personified Roberts as a known and recognizable star performer. Using the voice and body as Brockovich to mark

departures from the romcom roles not only made Roberts' performance more emotionally direct but also demonstrated a degree of actorly skill in transformation.

It is in this sense that Nathan's judgment that the performance allowed the viewer to forget Roberts the star and instead watch Brockovich the character can be understood. Yet this transformation was not as clear as Nathan suggested. In *Runaway Bride*, the most consistent physical sign which Roberts displayed was her distinctively wide smile: it appears in her introductory scene at the hardware store, at the hairdressers when she meets Ike for the first time, in the videos from Maggie's ill fated marriage ceremonies, after she attends confessional with former fiancée Brian, when flirting with ex-boyfriend Cory, confiding with her girlfriend Peggy, and of course in the many scenes which incrementally plot Maggie's growing affection for Ike. And likewise as Brockovich, periodically Roberts' smile resurfaced at many points as a reminder of her star presence, offering a reminder the film was still a star driven vehicle. Roberts' performance as Brockovich therefore used the voice and body to depart from the performance qualities she'd presented in the romantic comedies, yet at the same time her performance never entirely masked her star status.

Conclusion

For the study of film acting what is interesting about the awards system is how the voice and body of the performer become inserted into institutionalized frameworks of cultural legitimization which define acting of distinction. Despite her generic diversification, romantic comedy has continued to define Roberts' stardom. While romantic comedy has provided Roberts with box office success, when bestowing awards for acting the Academy has ignored the genre. *Erin Brockovich* performed well at the box and Roberts commanded a record breaking salary for appearing in the film, although the role departed from the familiar generic and commercial terrain on which her stardom and bankability were founded. Playing Brockovich saw Roberts not only moving between genres but also transforming the voice and body. For Roberts, romantic comedy built an association with certain vocal and physical traits, and she shed some of these for her performance as Brockovich. Taking that role provided Roberts with the opportunity to use the voice and body to display actorly skill but also distance herself from the culturally de-legitimized context of romantic comedy. Unlike the emotional lightness of the romcom roles, Roberts found an opportunity when playing Brockovich to, in Macauley's words, do 'some real acting for a change'.¹⁸

Roberts' Oscar win was therefore achieved through using the voice and body to portray character in ways distinct from the type of performance which had made her star. Yet at the same time the performance never completely removed the familiar signs of Roberts' on-screen presence. Paradoxically, *Erin Brockovich* was both a star driven vehicle and a disavowal of Roberts' star status. Consequently, the performance saw Roberts appear as Brockovich but also as Roberts. Between *Runaway Bride* and *Erin Brockovich*, Roberts used the voice and body to not only move genres but also negotiate the commercial and cultural tensions of the Academy Awards to achieve a journey from bankable star to institutionally legitimized actor.

[3,490 words]

1. Emanuel Levy, *Oscar Fever: The History and Politics of the Academy Awards*, pp. 338-9.

2. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 'Roberts Awaiting a \$20 Million Payday', March 2 1999, p. 96.
3. Chris Petrikin, 'Best Femme Figures Wear Dollar Signs', *Variety*, October 10 1998, p. 6.
4. For details of Roberts' box office performance during the 1990s, see Paul McDonald, *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* (London: Wallflower, 2000), p. 99.
5. Anthony D'Alessandro, 'Top 250 of 2000', *Variety*, January 8 2001, pp. 21-1.
6. As their runs continued up to and beyond the period when the Oscar nominations were announced, both *As Good As It Gets* and *Shakespeare in Love* had become respectable hits by the occasions at which Hunt and Paltrow were presented with their awards.
7. Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed', in Randal Johnson (ed.), *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993), pp.29-73.
8. At the end of 2000, *Chocolat* had grossed \$4.2m but the film continued its run into 2001 and by the time the 73rd Academy Awards were presented in late March, the cumulative gross had increased to nearly \$60.1m. Eventually the film sold over \$71.3m in tickets at the North American box office and appeared at 36th position in *Variety*'s end of year rankings. Anthony D'Alessandro, 'Top Grossing Pics of 2001', *Variety*, January 7 2002, pp. 38-9.
9. Levy, *Oscar Fever: The History and Politics of the Academy Awards*, p. 175.
10. Adaptations of quality literature were represented by Emma Thompson in *The Remains of the Day*, Winona Ryder for *Little Women*, Meryl Streep in *The Bridges of Madison County*, Emma Thompson in *Sense and Sensibility*, Helena Bonham Carter for *The Wings of the Dove*, and Julianne Moore with *The End of the Affair*. Jessica Lange's performance in *Blue Sky*, together with Kristen Scott Thomas in *The English Patient* and Kate Winslet in *Titanic* demonstrated the Academy's liking for women in period romances or dramas. Portraits of historical regal figures (e.g. Judi Dench in *Mrs Brown* or Cate Blanchett in *Elizabeth*) and biopics of real life entertainers or artists (e.g. Angela Bassett in *What's Love Got to Do with It* and Emily Watson in *Hilary and Jackie*) were also favoured.
11. Sean Macauley, 'Her Brilliant Career Move', *The Times*, 20 March 2000, p. 22.
12. Macauley, 'Her Brilliant Career Move', p. 22.
13. Ian Nathan, 'Erin Brockovich', *Empire*, May 2000, p. 12.
14. Barbara Klinger, *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 69.
15. Nathan, 'Erin Brockovich', p. 12.
16. Barry King, 'Articulating Stardom', *Screen*, vol. 26 no. 5 (1985), pp. 27-50.
17. Macauley, 'Her Brilliant Career Move', p. 22.
18. Macauley, 'Her Brilliant Career Move', p. 22.

Filmography

As Good As It Gets (James L. Brooks, Mark Andrus and James L. Brooks, 1997)
Blue Sky (Tony Richardson, Rama Laurie Stagner, Arlene Sarner and Jerry Leichtling, 1994)
Boys Don't Cry (Kimberly Peirce, Kimberly Peirce and Andy Bienen, 1999)
The Bridges of Madison County (Clint Eastwood, Richard LaGravenese, 1995)
The China Syndrome (James Bridges, Mike Gray, T. S. Cook and James Bridges, 1979)

Chocolat (Lasse Hallström, Robert Nelson Jacobs, 2000)
The Color Purple (Steven Spielberg, Menno Meyjes, 1985)
Conspiracy Theory (Richard Donner, Brian Helgeland, 1997)
The Contender (Rod Lurie, Rod Lurie, 2000)
Dead Man Walking (Tim Robbins, Tim Robbins, 1995)
Elizabeth (Shekhar Kapur, Michael Hirst, 1998)
The English Patient (Anthony Minghella, Anthony Minghella, 1996)
The End of the Affair (Neil Jordan, Neil Jordan, 1999)
Erin Brockovich (Steven Soderbergh, Susannah Grant, 2000)
Fargo (Joel and Ethan Coen, Joel and Ethan Coen, 1996)
Hilary and Jackie (Anand Tucker, Frank Cottrell Boyce, 1998)
Hook (Steven Spielberg, James V. Hart and Malia Scotch Marmo, 1991)
Howards End (James Ivory, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, 1992)
Little Women (Gillian Armstrong, Robin Swicord, 1994)
Mary Reilly (Stephen Frears, Christopher Hampton, 1996)
Misery (Rob Reiner, William Goldman, 1990)
Missing (Costa-Gavras, Costa-Gavras and Donald Stewart, 1982)
Monster (Patty Jenkins, Patty Jenkins, 2003)
Mrs Brown (John Madden, Jeremy Brock, 1997)
Music Box (Costa-Gavras, Joe Eszterhas, 1989)
My Best Friend's Wedding (P.J. Hogan, Ronald Bass, 1997)
Norma Rae (Martin Ritt, Harriet Frank Jr. and Irving Ravetch, 1979)
Notting Hill (Roger Michell, Richard Curtis, 1999)
The Pelican Brief (Alan J. Pakula, Alan J. Pakula, 1993)
The Piano (Jane Campion, Jane Campion, 1993)
Pretty Woman (Garry Marshall, J.F. Lawton, 1990)
The Remain of the Day (James Ivory, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, 1993)
Requiem for a Dream (Darren Aronofsky, Hubert Selby Jr. and Darren Aronofsky, 2000)
Rocky (John G. Avildsen, Sylvester Stallone, 1976)
Runaway Bride (Garry Marshall, Sara Parriott, 1999)
Sense and Sensibility (Ang Lee, Emma Thompson, 1995)
Shakespeare in Love (John Madden, Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, 1998)
The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, Ted Tally, 1991)
Silkwood (Mike Nichols, Nora Ephron and Alice Arlen, 1983)
Sleeping With the Enemy (Joseph Ruben, Ronald Bass, 1991)
Stepmom (Chris Columbus, Gigi Levangie, Jessie Nelson, Steven Rogers, Karen Leigh Hopkins and Ronald Bass, 1998)
Titanic (James Cameron, James Cameron, 1997)
What's Love Got to Do With It (Brian Gibson, Kate Lanier, 1993)
The Wings of the Dove (Iain Softley, Hossein Amini, 1997)
You Can Count on Me (Kenneth Lonergan, Kenneth Lonergan, 2000)