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**From Action Babe to Mature Actress: The Place of Humanitarianism in Angelina Jolie’s Lasting Screen Career**

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Since assuming the role of goodwill ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in August 2001, Angelina Jolie has met with refugees and internally displaced persons in over twenty countries, lobbied high-ranking politicians, including President Barack Obama, and documented her hands-on experiences of humanitarian crises in numerous public appearances and interviews, as well as a series of journal entries that were published in 2003. This on-the-ground campaigning, along with her extensive donations to causes around the globe, has earned the actress high praise from aid workers and journalists, in addition to various accolades: Jolie currently holds the title of Special Envoy to UNHCR - a position she has occupied since April 2012 - and is regularly ranked among the most influential stars by the press (Forbes, 2012).

In this same period, Jolie’s screen image also underwent a number of transformations: moving from the wildchild persona of early films *Gia* (1998) and *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), to her emergence as a major action star in the early-2000s, with notable leading roles in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (2005); while, most recently, the actress has combined her action star turns with voice work in family-friendly animation (*Kung Fu Panda* (2008)), as well as low-key performances in dramas such as *Changeling* (2008).

Jolie’s humanitarianism has been instrumental to each of these transformations, working to reinforce established aspects of her screen image, while also adding new associations that have contributed to her enduring appeal: since scoring her first major commercial hit in 2001 (*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*), Jolie has featured regularly on *Forbes*’s annual list of the top-earning Hollywood actresses, achieving the number one spot in 2009, 2011, and 2013 (Pomerantz, 2013).

The charitable and political activities of movie stars are often dismissed as an exercise in public relations - something Jolie herself was accused of in 2006, when she appeared to use her UNHCR duties to offset the scandal surrounding her romance with *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* co-star, Brad Pitt. However, despite the routine nature of such readings among both scholars and journalists (Dieter & Kumar, 2006; Hyde, 2009), few have provided in-depth accounts of how campaigning might assist or extend a star’s career.

This chapter looks at the relationship between Jolie's work for various causes and the development of her film career. I concentrate on the period 2007-14, starting with her starring role in *A Mighty Heart* (2007) and ending with her biggest box office hit to date - *Maleficent* (2014). This period is significant because it spans Jolie’s mid- to late-30s, an age when the opportunities for female film stars tend to decline. I argue that Jolie’s humanitarianism was pivotal to her screen stardom in these years, feeding into her films in ways that brought both critical approval, and commercial rewards.

**1998-2006: Breaking into the A-List**

Jolie rose to prominence in the late-1990s, with her Oscar-winning portrayal of a teenage psychiatric patient in *Girl, Interrupted*. The role of Lisa Rowe - a ‘sociopath’ who torments the other patients on her ward - established Jolie as a promising talent, with Roger Ebert (2000) commenting upon the film’s release: ‘[She’s] emerging as one of the great wild spirits of current movies’. This reputation as a raw and uncompromising actress corresponded with contemporary media coverage of her private life. Indeed, at the same time that she received critical acclaim for *Girl, Interrupted*, Jolie cultivated an offscreen image as ‘Hollywood’s wildchild’, achieving notoriety for her love of knives, as well as her sexual experimentation and substance abuse (Richardson, 2000).

After winning a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for *Girl, Interrupted*, Jolie abandoned the edgy and intimate roles that had first brought her to popular attention, opting to work almost exclusively in action films. From 2001-2006, she played ass-kicking heroines in a succession of blockbusters: *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*; its 2003 sequel, *Cradle of Life*; and the husband-and-wife assassin movie *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. These three films grossed over $900 million in cinemas, establishing Jolie as one of the biggest action stars of the decade (Box Office Mojo).

Although Jolie’s work in action movies has been fundamental to her success, propelling her into the elite band of stars who can command $15 million per picture, it posed certain obstacles to her acting career as she moved into her mid-30s. The first of these concerns the relatively short-lived nature of female stardom within the action genre. While actors like Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis have continued to work in blockbuster action films into their 50s and 60s, few female action stars can lay claim to such longevity. Jolie is one of the few actresses who has consistently starred in big-budget action films in her mid-30s, achieving success in the genre as recently as 2010 when *The Tourist* and *Salt* grossed a combined total of $570 million. Actresses working in the action genre therefore exhibit a more acute version of the short shelf-life that afflicts most female stars. Paul McDonald (2012, pp. 30-31) notes how the commercial fortunes of female stars tend to decline at an earlier age than their male counterparts. Likewise, Peter Kramer (2003, pp. 201-203) observes a general downturn in the box office performance of female stars when they reach 35.

With their physically active but hyper-sexualised heroines, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* and the *Tomb Raider* films are examples of a sub-genre that Marc O’Day (2004, pp. 204-206) has dubbed the ‘action babe cinema’. O’Day differentiates characters like Lara Croft from the earlier action heroines of the 1970s and 80s – characters such as Ripley in *Alien* (1979) – due to the way in which they combine sexual spectacle with empowerment, through an emphasis on both their feminine figure, and their martial arts expertise. This doubled emphasis on the heroine’s physique results in a particularly narrow window of opportunity for female stars in the action babe cinema because as O’Day explains, ‘the [genre] demands an actress who is “young” - (usually in her twenties or early thirties)’.

The second obstacle relates to the critical reception of these action films. While critics often marveled at Jolie’s ability to match the muscular presence of her male counterparts, her action films received poor reviews overall. Indeed, the actress was herself subjected to criticism in these years, earning Golden Raspberry nominations for both *Tomb Raider* films. As she turned 32 in June 2007, Jolie therefore had to contend with both diminishing opportunities in the action genre, and the fact that her critical standing had declined - she was no longer seen as the same daring young actress of the late-90s.

**From the *Heart*:Jolie’s Mature Acting Phase**

*A Mighty Heart*, directed by Michael Winterbottom and co-produced by Brad Pitt, marked the beginning of a new phase in Jolie’s film career, where she diversified beyond the action babe cinema. *Heart* depicts the events surrounding the death of Daniel Pearl, an American journalist who was kidnapped and beheaded by al Qaeda operatives while on a writing assignment in Karachi in 2002. Jolie stars as Daniel’s wife, Mariane Pearl, who wrote the 2003 memoir from which *Heart* is adapted. Shot in a naturalist style, the film details Mariane’s efforts to locate her husband, as she works with the local authorities and the CIA to uncover details of Daniel’s disappearance.

Reviewing *Heart* for *USA Today*, Claudia Puig (2007) hailed the film’s ‘intelligence’, setting aside praise for the way it handled a difficult subject without ‘sensationalism’. For Puig, Jolie was vital to this success, giving the film ‘its lifeblood’. Although *Heart* underperformed at the box office, realising only a minor profit on its $16 million budget, other critics tended to agree with Puig’s assessment. For example, Peter Howell (2007) awarded *Heart* four stars, adding that ‘Jolie is central’ to the film’s ‘honesty and courage’. These reviewers praised Jolie’s performance for its ‘understatement’, ‘nuance’, and ‘maturity’ - qualities rarely associated with the actress prior to 2007.

Curiously, a recurring theme across these reviews was Jolie’s philanthropy. P. David Marshall (1997, p. 110) explains that a connection to political and charitable causes 'deepens the character profile of the celebrity’, adding ‘possible connotations of depth, intelligence, and commitment’ to her/his public persona. This was certainly evident in the press reception of *Heart*, where Jolie’s on-the-ground campaigning helped to authenticate her portrayal of Mariane. A July 2007 segment on CBS, for example, explicitly made the connection between acting and humanitarianism when it prefaced a review of *Heart* with details of Jolie’s work for refugees, concluding: ‘It's that ability to empathize with others that's key not only to this role but to her life in general’ (Smith, 2007). Likewise, a pre-release article in the *Independent* framed Jolie’s ‘serious’ performance against the background of her previous field missions to Pakistan: Jolie first visited Pakistan in May 2005 to tour Afghan refugee camps on the outskirts of Peshawar and Islamabad; returning five months later to visit the site of the October earthquake in Kashmir (Palmer, 2007). From the perspective of these reviews, Jolie’s performance in *Heart* was the culmination of her extensive campaigning since 2001: the work of a socially conscious actress, whose first-hand experience of humanitarian crises gave her a strong grasp of the complex geopolitics depicted in the film, as well as its setting.

As a semi-independent drama based on real-life events, *Heart* is a far cry from the blockbusters for which Jolie was best known prior to 2007. Unsurprisingly, then, many reviewers expressed skepticism about her casting in such a ‘serious’, character-driven film. For example, the *Washington Post*’s Ann Hornaday (2007) wrote: ‘Jolie is a star of such stratospheric proportions that the chances of her disappearing into a character seem slim’. Yet, Hornaday, like many reviewers, went on to qualify her initial assessment: ‘[I]t turns out she is the perfect choice to play Mariane because her persona as a UN representative […] so seamlessly meshes with the global consciousness that the Pearls represent’. Jolie’s humanitarianism helped to mitigate concerns about her casting, therefore, with her campaigns counteracting not only the poor reviews that she had received in previous years, but also the negative associations wrought by her celebrity.

[IMAGE 1- UNHCR Photo]

In several respects, Jolie’s campaigns for UNHCR were consistent with her performances in the action babe cinema. For example, the star’s field missions to Pakistan and other exotic locales evoked elements of her role as a globe-trotting archaeologist/adventurer in the *Tomb Raider* films (like Jolie-the-humanitarian, Lara travels to hazardous regions around the world). At the same time, this UNHCR work shifted the terms of her representation. Photographs from Jolie’s UNHCR field missions around this time show the actress engaged in intimate conversations with refugees [See Figure 1]. In these images, Jolie models a range of facial expressions: from deep regret at the sight of human suffering, to captivation and delight as she is given the opportunity to interact with diverse groups of people. The focus here is on the star’s compassion – her ability to understand and share the feelings ‘of distant Others’ (Bell, 2013, p. 4). The effect of this footage in terms of Jolie’s star discourse, then, was to move her away from the Lara Croft role, by reinterpreting her strong female image in terms of an emotional rather than a physical strength. These texts also offered a departure from her hyper-sexualised representation in the action babe cinema, with photographs from Jolie’s field missions showing her dressed in baggy T-shirts, jeans, and/or some form of regional dress – clothing that contrasted sharply, in other words, with the tight vest and shorts worn by Lara Croft.

*Heart* offered a cinematic articulation of these broader shifts within Jolie’s image. At the simplest level, Jolie’s character aligned neatly with the transnational dimensions of her humanitarianism: a mixed-race French journalist living in Pakistan (she is of Afro-Cuban and Dutch heritage), Mariane evoked aspects of the global citizen image that Jolie projects through her UNHCR work. Furthermore, the role appeared to speak reflexively to the UN’s goal of promoting international co-operation. In the film’s climactic scene, Pearl preaches a sense of understanding and forgiveness that crosses national borders, calling on the international community to conceive of the costs of terrorism not just on the narrowly defined West, but on countries like Pakistan.

In *Heart*, Mariane is heavily pregnant throughout the search for her husband, while she is also shown together with her child in a flash-forward sequence. *Heart* therefore allowed Jolie to play out elements of her own family life at this time, drawing on her status as the mother of two adopted children - Maddox and Zahara, who were adopted from Cambodia and Ethiopia, respectively. Reviews often made the link between Jolie's motherhood and that of Mariane, citing this as further evidence of her ‘perfect’ fit for the role (Hornaday, 2007). Significantly, these critics tended to conflate Jolie’s motherhood with her humanitarianism. One reason for this was the fact Jolie’s adopted children were from countries she had previously visited as part of her campaigning.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Another reason for this conflation of motherhood and humanitarianism is the tendency for female celebrity campaigners to be valued as ‘motherly nurturers’ (Wilkins, 2014, p. 4). Indeed, Jolie is the latest in a long list of female stars – Audrey Hepburn, Mia Farrow, and Madonna – whose humanitarian activities have been framed in maternal terms (Trope, 2012). Continuing this tradition, promotional images from her 2005 field missions show Jolie flanked by children. Moreover, the actress encourages this blurring of the familial and philanthropic when she uses the same vocabulary of global citizenship to describe her high-profile adoptions as she does for her UNHCR campaigns, declaring: ‘I want to create a rainbow family. That's children […] from different countries’ (Daily Mail, 2006). Such comments and photographs play a role in driving the media obsession with Jolie’s status as a revered celebrity ‘mom’. Whether depicting her public or her private life, the focus of these texts is the star’s depth of feeling.

Recent scholarship about celebrity humanitarianism has explored the gendered dynamics of this phenomenon (Wilkins, 2014). Katherine Bell (2013), for example, observes how the tendency to present (white) female campaigners as mothers not only reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, but also invokes colonial discourses which construct the imperial project as a mission to ‘raise’ the Third World – where the majority of celebrity campaigning is directed toward Africa. Jolie has herself been the subject of such criticism. Most notably, the star courted controversy in May 2006 over her decision to give birth to daughter Shiloh in Namibia. Jolie and her partner, Pitt, were accused of using their star power to obtain privileged access to the Namibian government – access that allowed the couple’s security team to conduct door-to-door searches to locate unauthorized members of the media (Barron, 2009).[[2]](#endnote-2) Journalist Marina Hyde (2009, p. 178) dubbed the event ‘Apocalypse Brangelina’, for instance, comparing Jolie and Pitt’s actions to those of Walter E. Kurtz – the megalomaniacal army colonel in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). However, these blunders, and the problematic gender and racial discourses they activate, have largely gone unremarked upon in the press reception of Jolie’s humanitarianism. For the most part, she has been celebrated for using her empowered mother image to ‘do good’ (Forbes, 2012; Smith, 2007).

Deborah Jermyn (2012, p. 44) explains how the mother is ‘one of the few character types that has remained relatively available’ to Hollywood actresses over 50. Although still in her early-40s, Jolie’s career – with its succession of mother roles in *Heart*, *Changeling*,and *Maleficent* - has shown traces of the kind of typecasting of ‘mature’ female stars that Jermyn identifies. These film roles, intricately tied to her family life and humanitarianism, are one of the ways in which Jolie has altered her onscreen image to accommodate her maturing stardom, allowing her to age in a fashion that both Hollywood and the wider culture deems ‘appropriate’.

Jolie’s UNHCR campaigns have been crucial in laying the foundations for a long film career, therefore - one which extends beyond the period when she can no longer realistically play characters like Lara Croft. Perhaps most importantly, these activities facilitated her return to serious dramatic films, where there are more opportunities for actresses in their late-30s and 40s. In 2008, Jolie cemented her status as a serious actress with her Oscar nominated performance as a single mother in the period drama *Changeling*. More recently, Jolie took a break from acting to pursue a career behind the camera, making her directorial feature debut with *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (2011) - a film about Bosnian Muslim women imprisoned in Serbian rape camps during the Bosnian War (1992-1995). However, Jolie’s campaigning has contributed not just to the critical acclaim that she earned for these serious dramas, but also to her enduring popularity in action-adventure blockbusters.

***Maleficent*’s Blockbusting Activism**

After a three-and-a-half-year absence, Jolie made a successful return to the big screen when the children’s fantasy *Maleficent*, in which she stars as the eponymous protagonist, grossed $70 million during its opening weekend. The film is a live-action reinterpretation of the Disney classic *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), with Jolie playing the queen fairy who casts a sleeping curse on the new-born princess, Aurora - a curse that can only be broken by ‘true love’s kiss’. While the 1959 Maleficent was a one-dimensional villain, Jolie’s character is drawn in more complex and sympathetic terms, casting the curse only after her wings are brutally removed by Aurora’s father, King Stefan. In a further twist on the traditional fairy-tale narrative, the 2014 film centres on the relationship between Aurora and Maleficent: guilt-ridden by her decision to curse an innocent baby, Maleficent vows to protect Aurora from harm, and ultimately comes to act as a surrogate mother for the princess throughout her childhood; indeed, it is Maleficent’s kiss which breaks the curse in the final act, confirming both her love for the princess, and her status as the film’s heroine.

On 1 September 2014, worldwide ticket sales for *Maleficent* surpassed $750 million, making it Jolie’s biggest commercial hit at the age of 39. Although *Maleficent* was marketed as a Disney picture, Jolie featured prominently in the promotional campaign as the studio sought to build anticipation through her return to acting. Early posters for *Maleficent* showed Jolie in close-up, for instance, wearing the black cape and horns of her character. In contrast to her costume, Jolie’s skin is porcelain white in these posters, while the red of her lips is digitally enhanced to provide a shot of vivid colour. This monochrome aesthetic foregrounds Jolie’s facial features, suggesting that her ‘famous hornet-stung lips’ are as iconic as her character’s horns (Richardson, 2000, p. 93). These posters are also significant in terms of the broader development of Jolie’s star image. The emphasis here is on the face, rather than the body, reinforcing the extent to which Jolie has moved from the hyper-sexualised image of her action babe years. At the same time, however, the blood-red color of the lips invokes themes of carnality and temptation. Elements of Jolie’s earlier personae remain present, then, existing alongside her new roles as mother and humanitarian.

[INSERT Maleficent screenshot]

In his review of *Maleficent* for the *Washington Post*, Michael Cavna (2014) noted how the film is ‘deepened by the meta-narrative of [Jolie’s] own life’, referring to the way in which the plot draws on both her bad-girl-gone-good image, and her motherhood – an allusion that is made explicit by the casting of Jolie’s own daughter, Vivienne Jolie-Pitt, as the four-year-old Aurora. Yet, the plot also folds in elements of the star’s humanitarianism. In the film, Maleficent acts as guardian of the Moors, a magical realm populated by various creatures and wildlife. As guardian of the Moors, Jolie’s character must defend her home against the constant threat of human invasion. In an early action sequence, Maleficent fends off an army of marauding soldiers, using her wings to propel her enemies backward [See Figure 2]. The camera frames Jolie in medium long shot, capturing the full expanse of her wings. Although this shot recalls the physical prowess of Jolie’s action roles, it also invokes the saintly image that she has cultivated in her UNHCR campaigns: Maleficent comes to the rescue of the other magical creatures, using her spectacular abilities to help those who cannot protect themselves. Jolie’s costume in this sequence is also significant – barefoot and wearing a long, flowing dress, Maleficent is simultaneously winged adventurer and earth mother, action star and humanitarian.

In a June 2014 interview for *Woman’s Hour*, Jolie established a series of parallels between *Maleficent* and her recent campaigns to raise awareness of sexual violence in conflict – indeed, the interview was part of the star’s work to promote the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (ESVI). Held in London in June 2014, ESVI was a four-day summit where Jolie gave the opening address. Speaking about the scene in which Maleficent’s wings are torn from her body, Jolie confirmed that this was intended as ‘a metaphor for rape’, commenting: ‘The core of [*Maleficent*] is abuse’ (Wallace, 2014). With these comments, Jolie sought to take advantage of a correlation that emerged between her ESVI appearance and her latest film – to merge these two star projects together in a fashion best described as ‘synergistic’.

Alison Trope (2012, p. 188) argues that it is common for stars to ‘directly align their artistic […] output with the causes they support’. Media coverage of this type of campaigning – so often skewed towards the star’s output and not the cause – prompts the question, ‘Who stands to gain more?’ Jo Littler (2008, p. 241) notes how humanitarian campaigning offers an ‘extremely cost-effective’ way for a star to gain wide exposure for her/his brand, for example. The experiences of Jolie, by and large, serve to uphold such a reading: her work with UNHCR added new associations to her star image as she moved into her mid-30s; and these associations have, in turn, been pivotal to the way in which Jolie has expanded her onscreen brand in this period, moving beyond the action babe cinema into other genres. Indeed, the branding opportunities generated by celebrity campaigning were certainly evident in the case of *Maleficent*, where Jolie’s ESVI interview corresponded with Disney’s efforts to market the film as an edgy, revisionist fairy tale with cross-generational appeal.

Rather than simply transferring political energy onto the pop-culture sphere, the star’s comments also used the film and its broad appeal to mediate and amplify the campaign against sexual violence in conflict. Jolie’s onscreen performances are crucial to the affective power that she wields as a campaigner – *Maleficent* and several earlier films, including *Heart* and the *Tomb Raider* franchise, engage a number of discourses that overlap with her ESVI campaigns. Indeed, it is the strong female image that she projects in these films that animates much of what Jolie now does as a humanitarian, rendering her campaigns visible for audiences who might otherwise be unaware of such issues. More than just self-promotion, Jolie’s ESVI interview illustrates how stars are able to exploit connections between their films and their campaigning to advance not only their own brands, but those of the causes they support. While Jolie’s efforts to align her humanitarianism with her films have not always been successful (both *Heart* and *In the Land of Blood and Honey* underperformed commercially), this strategy has played a significant part in several career milestones. Foremost among these milestones was *Maleficent* - a film which bucked the trend of diminishing box office returns for female stars over 35.

**Conclusion**

At a time when almost every Hollywood star appears to support one or more causes, it is important to study how the films and campaigns of these individuals intersect (Gulam, 2014). This chapter has examined the place of humanitarianism in Jolie’s lasting screen career, endeavouring to show how the star’s work with UNHCR featured in her transition from action babe to mature actress. Although Jolie’s willingness to speak out on various issues has brought its fair share of criticism (Hyde, 2009), it has also contributed to her enduring appeal. This was apparent in the case of her recent decision to publicly disclose the details of her preventative double mastectomy. In a *New York Times* op-ed published in May 2013, Jolie revealed how she chose to undergo surgery because of her high risk of developing breast cancer: she is a carrier of the ‘faulty’ BRCA1 gene (Jolie, 2013). The response to Jolie’s announcement was generally positive, with various commentators praising her ‘thoughtfulness’ and ‘bravery’ (Hollywood Reporter, 2013). What this incident clarifies is how a star’s interventions into important issues – health debates, humanitarian crises, and so on – have the potential to reinforce pre-existing aspects of her/his star persona, while also adding new qualities that can aid career longevity. In her real-life campaigning, as on the big screen, Jolie has projected an image of ‘strong’, ‘compassionate’ female stardom, which has both adapted to her maturing years, and demonstrated sustained popularity.

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1. Jolie’s foundation, the Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation, has funded development projects in Cambodia and Ethiopia. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jolie and Pitt sold the US rights to the first photographs of Shiloh to *People* magazine for $4.1 million, which they donated to charity (Hyde, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)