

Jackson Dockery
Date: 3/11/16



Run Tom Run: The Unexpected Stereotype

I think when you start a high-concept, analytical paper on the arts and what they mean in the world, you should always ask the hard-hitting, down-to-earth, what-the-people-want-to-hear questions that...well the people want to hear.

Can you name a Tom Hanks character?

And at first I know what you're going to say, "Oh come on bro, you've got to be kidding me bro, *Forrest Gump* bro. Not a tough question. Not a tough YOU bro." And although you may be true Uncle Eli from Boston, I'd omit that one because the character's name is in the freakin' title. So then you may go, oh Tom Hanks in *Big*, or Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*, or Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan*, but as you go on you realize that these aren't characters but merely an actor and the movies he's been in. It's no question Hanks is currently one of the world's most beloved American actor, a man who is undeniably talented and versatile. But why then do we find ourselves with each movie he makes, more and more detached from the great characters that he's creating? Is it the thick blur of celebrity? Perhaps the immense fame Hanks has garnered has not hurt his performance, but our perception of them. Hindering our ability to lose ourselves in a story and leave the real world outside for the theater we've walked into. Consistently Hanks has been putting out awards-deserving work in recent films such as *Saving Mr. Banks*, *Captain Phillips*, and *Bridge of Spies*, but in recent years

Hanks has been an afterthought when it comes to recognition for his work. Is it a matter of expectation, that since we know Hanks will be good there's surprise in his performance having taken his talent for granted, or have we become so accustomed to the man Tom Hanks over the years, that the men he plays are just different versions of Tom Hanks in different situations. In a sense, Tom Hanks has ceased to be his characters in our eyes, thus according to the audiences of today, making him by our perception and the definition of what makes a good actor, not a good actor. Even as he continues to test himself in roles that speak to Hanks' desire for character and not popularity or maintaining relevance. Though through our stereotyping of actors and their work as an audience of cinema, Tom Hanks is in danger of becoming one of the greatest forgotten talents in cinema of the 21st Century.

The source of Tom Hanks should look to the movie that created the divide between Act 1 and Act 2 of his body of work. A movie that is very near and dear to my heart, as well as to all the parents who want to show their kids that being an adult isn't all it's cracked up to be, *Big*. Hanks has done it all, sports movie, period-piece drama, war movie, buddy-cop-movie-where-one-of-the-buddies-is-a-dog, you name it he's done it. But for the majority of the beginning of his career in the 80s, he was mainly known as a goofball, comedic sitcom actor who had to that point mainly starred in poorly made, goofball 80s comedies. And although Hanks projects were far from excellent (*Bosom Buddies*, *Dragnet*, *Volunteers*, *Nothing in Common*), his performances in them were never the problem, showing a great natural charisma and wit (*Bachelor Party*), as well as a knack for physical comedy (*The Money Pit*). So in 1988 Hanks was salivating for an opportunity to finally show that he's more than his 80's mediocre comedic persona. Hanks did this in a way that may be explained in Anne Bogart's essay, "Stereotype." Bogart writes that, "If we embrace rather than avoid stereotype, if we enter the container and push against its limits, we are testing our humanity and our wakefulness. The containers are powerful visual and audio stimuli for audiences and, if handled with

great vigilance by the artist, can connect us with time.” (Bogart 301) Instead of Hanks trying something completely different and not being taken seriously by audiences, he instead decides to lure the audience in with what they expect, and then honestly surprise them with the unexpected. We see Hanks apply this idea to his role in *Big*; by using the outline of his typical, silly comedic character, he then lights a fire under that outline and type of character were so used to seeing him play and he twists our perception of what we thought that character was all about, giving it real dramatic stakes unseen in Hanks previous work. Thus, Hanks gives us a fully nuanced character that we are able to fully take in, because of the freshly new side of Hanks exposed to us. We do not see the same old actor doing the same old character, we instead see solely the new, original character.

Hanks does this throughout the film, but his execution of this busting the stereotype is best highlighted in the silent, more poignant moments of the film. Hanks sets up the breaking of his stereotype by giving us a bunch of great comedic moments such as his pure wonder of the limo with a sunroof or his innocent ignorance of the difference between him and love interest Elizabeth

Perkins’ idea of a sleepover is. Director Penny Marshall had the child actor for the character of Josh act out all the adult scenes on tape, so Hanks could study the child’s mannerisms. But perhaps all is best exemplified in the classic piano scene. Hanks’ Josh accidentally stumbles upon the giant piano, and like a kid moving on



to his next toy, says “neat” and immediately and instinctively tosses his bag of toys off-screen that he was just playing, suddenly leaving his conversation with his boss without warning, and sliding around on the piano testing it out, as he has become completely infatuated with his new discovery. And as you take a closer look, Hanks’ boss who’s performing the duet is constantly looking at Hanks

and how what they're both doing is ridiculous, while Hanks subtly never looks up from the piano as you can tell Hanks' Josh is taking this very seriously in that he's completely focused on this and not caring how he looks to anybody, but just having fun.

But where we see his comedic performance crack is in moments like the patient handling and careful yet calculated performance, of Josh's sex scene. As he is kissing Perkins' Susan passionately, you notice that his hands are awkwardly too high; he has an almost clammy tension to them, his body hunched over and not confident or formal. And as Susan takes off her shirt and he reaches for her breast, there's a great hesitation that Hanks uses, using his eyes to show how he's full of both excitement and fear, a moment that Hanks could've easily found a cheap gag in, but instead takes the moments seriously, as it provides the turning point in the film where we see Josh begin to lose himself in adulthood. And we see the kind of realization after his fight with his friend



Billy, in the montage of him watching all different kinds of kids just being kids. As he's watching kids ride their bikes and play in the leaves saying "just 5 more minutes!" Josh can't help but smile at the things he loves. But where we get that sense of bitter in the bittersweet is when he sees high schoolers piling into a car to go out, and two friends playing baseball. Here, Hanks shows begins to in slight changes in posture and expression, how his character now sees the life he's missed out on and the friend he'd left behind. But although, he's sad, there's a twinge in Hanks' eye, of not being sad about what he's done, but sad and nervous about what he knows he's going to have to do. Go back home. And while although both these scenes at face value are extremely creepy (A 13-year-old having sex with an adult, and a 30 year old man walking around watching kids), Hanks is able to

deftly maneuver the comedy and drama of this movie creating such a human character, that we forget the ridiculousness of his circumstances and relate to him as this everyman kind of guy who's plight we find ourselves understanding and taking seriously.

Big is where Hanks' prototypical, "Goofy Comedic Lead Character" persona died, and created what we know of him today, "The Wholesome American Everyman: Tom Hanks." Using his comedic sensibilities, Hanks played into his regular role of the comedic lead as a plucky thirteen year old trapped in a 30 year old man's body. Mixing that with a dramatic side of him that had long been dormant to audiences, Hanks created the ultimate relatable character, of the Everyday American in unbelievable circumstances. And this character was then imprinted and ingrained into our psyches with a succession of popular films in the 90's that played to this very archetype, dooming us to confining Hanks' work into a single, narrow, shared interpretation of his art.

Our unconscious perception shift came as a result of these everyman films that fall into the realm of the everyday American man against the world, and what people see as the willpower of the American, when it's really just the strength and determination of a man. A character. Hanks' stereotyped performances are very much in line with Spielbergian Cinematic Goodness. Much how Stephen King represents the worst in humanity, Steven Spielberg represents the best, a man who tells stories of humanity and the triumph of the human spirit against all odds for the happy ending we all hope is coming. Now Spielberg, like Hanks, has strayed from this, but it makes up the majority of his popular films, and Hanks, during his peak of popularity in the 90's, did a string of movies with these kinds of ideas, and these films turned out to be his most popular mainly *Forrest Gump*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Cast Away*. With *Forrest Gump* Hanks, although playing outside his comfort zone as a mentally disabled man, spends almost the entire movie at the service director Robert Zemeckis's vision of summarizing the second half of 20th Century American history, using Hanks' character more as a vehicle for that story of a man that participates in some of the most important events in

American history *against incredible odds*. With *Cast Away* we get the story of an American thrown into unbelievable circumstances as he is stranded on an island and *against all odds*, fights to survive and get home. And with *Saving Private Ryan*, Hanks actually teamed with Steven Spielberg portraying Army Captain Miller and his battalion as they push through WWII's Western Europe to save Private Ryan. Here Hanks gives us a determined yet weathered American fighting *against incredible odds* for his country. And midway through the film there's a moment that is interpreted two very different ways; it's Miller's speech to his men when insubordination starts about why they're even trying to rescue this Private Ryan after so many of their men had died. Now at face value and at the service of what

audience members want to believe of Hanks, his speech is about calming the troops down, to rally them so they can find this guy because it's their duties as Americans. But if you look deeper



into the speech and how Hanks treats the material, it's so much more than that. Hanks isn't portraying this wholesomely good man who's proud of his country, in this speech you get the feeling of broken man under the uniform, how he's just as scared as the next guy and isn't proud of what he's doing or even what his country's doing. Miller says, "Now Ryan, I don't know anything about Ryan. I don't care. Man means nothin' to me." Hanks has a surprising sense of disdain in his voice for this man who's indirectly cost the lives of his own. And with a speech like this it easily could've been a big, screaming, scenery-chewing monologue that makes you pump your fist into the air. But Hanks instead pulls a complete 180 with a soft, restrained desperation in his tone and eyes, taking an anxious pause before he tells his men that he's a schoolteacher because his anonymity had been such

a big part of the movie, that Hanks knew that servicing that line honestly, was more powerful than any scream or yell he could muster to control his men.

Again you see this Anne Bogart idea of pushing the limits of the stereotype, but perhaps here he just does not have enough to push against. But this repetition of film roles has led to a pattern and trend forming a hard-to-shake interpretation of his work. And this popular interpretation is detrimental to us experiencing Hanks' work, and many other actors and artists in general that fall into being perceived as one type or style of art. Susan Sontag talks about these dangers, but also as to why we tend to do this in her essay "Against Interpretation," as she writes, "In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable." (Sontag 5) Because of this insistent interpretation on our parts, we've closed off ourselves to being able to openly take in Tom Hanks work as an artist because we just prefer being subjected to the Tom Hanks we're used to. We've stereotyped Hanks to the point where when we see him in a movie, there are things we feel we automatically know happen in the movie without even having to see it. We assume to know he'll live the whole movie, or if he dies it'll be at the end. We know the good guys will win. We know we'll get a happy ending and we'll feel good about being American. And perhaps most glaring of all, we know he's Tom Hanks in it. But maybe I'm looking too far into it and going all "*Room 237* Crazy Conspiracist" over this. It's not entirely our modern day audience's natural tendencies that caused Hanks to be in the position he's in now. Because of his succession of films moviegoers have now noticed a trend in his films to the point where they don't need to see his movies, because they know Hanks and his typical character and the types of movies he's known for so well, that these people feel that they've already formed a fair opinion on it. Judith Butler touches on this natural association that we have with certain artists in her piece on photographer Diane Arbus's work,

“Judith Butler on Diane Arbus.” She writes how, “when I asked a few friends to accompany me to Arbus, nearly everyone declined: They had political repugnance for the objectifying photos; they thought it would be ‘depressing.’ To them, Arbus’s photographic gaze seems inappropriately fascinated by human distortions...However true these criticisms may be, there is something else going on with these photos to which some of this moralizing may well be blind.” (Butler 2) Here you see how an artist's work can be grouped together and defined as a single style or type, when, like Arbus says, in their so-called common work you find things that radically separate one piece of art from the next, much like how Hanks did in *Saving Private Ryan*, needs to keep pushing at the boundaries of what audiences have defined him as.

But it’s to the point where now all we see is Tom Hanks, and his characters and their desires, actions, and story are all veiled under the common notion that that is Tom Hanks onscreen, and he’s probably doing a great job. It’s in a way like and unlike the idea talked about in Lucy Van Atta’s “A Paradox of Truth and Fiction: Meryl Streep and Acting Modern Realism,” where she analyzes the actress’s work and how, “In spite of Streep’s tremendous versatility, a certain familiar quality permeates every performance—a strong (albeit elusive) sense of the real woman behind each finely crafted persona— which makes one wonder where exactly the actress ends and the character begin.” (Van Atta 84) While although both actors fall under the umbrella of the same issue, Streep’s dilemma is never knowing how much of Meryl Streep is in the characters she portrays. Whereas with Hanks, the way we interpret his work is making us clearly and unfairly divide his work in a film between whatever character he’s playing, and “hey that’s Tom Hanks!” and not letting the man and the performance hand in hand to create something wholly different.

His efforts for the past decade or so have been just that, trying to shake his persona and be received as new from an audience again. Hanks has tried to distance himself from the nice All-

American male lead roles we're accustomed to, and has been trying to make us forget Tom Hanks by trying wholly different roles and types of movies. He's helped mold one of the greatest trilogies in cinematic history and upping the popularity and respect of cinematic voice work in the Toy Story movies. He's worked behind the screen more than he has on it in recent years producing deep, gritty HBO mini-series in *The Pacific* and *Band of Brothers* covering the history of WWII. He's even taken on weird and complex supporting roles in films like *The Ladykillers* and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. But no effort strikes more of a chord of Hanks willingness to keep challenging



himself, than the recent and controversially received epic film, *Cloud Atlas*. A movie which multiple times in pre-production that looked like they couldn't do it, or had enough studio support, but

was a project championed by the good will and enthusiasm of Hanks to get made. In it, Hanks took on the arduous task of playing 5 different characters in 5 different stories spanning 5 different time periods and places. And we even get to see him in a light we never associated Hanks with before, villainous. He plays everything from a putridly nasty and evil pirate doctor, an unsure yet love-stricken nuclear scientist, to a murderously insecure Scottish gangster. We literally get to see Forrest Gump toss a book critic off a building just because of a bad review. But the best character we get from Hanks is the one that chronologically ends the movie, Zachry, a weary, cowardly man living in a post-apocalyptic future. And in one scene we see vulnerability in Hanks we may have never seen before, as his brother-in-law and nephew are ambushed by a pack cannibals, Hanks succumbs to his fears and watched as they're slaughtered, with a frozen expression of both fear and regret. As he lets his family die, Hanks looks as though he's teetering on the edge of breaking down or screaming but

know that he's too scared to do either, less he be killed as well. This is a far cry from Captain Miller. And though we see Zachry follow a path of redemption in the film, you cannot help but feel utter sadness yet disgust for Hanks. An emotion Hanks elicited from audiences that I don't think he's ever done before. For the first time I think ever since I started watching movies, I truly forgot about Tom Hanks this and Tom Hanks that and had first time felt truly emotionally connected to his character onscreen, a feeling I don't I'd felt from Hanks since *Big*.

But Hanks still, like a regular old human being, slips up sometimes, or maybe knowingly just chooses to fulfill the characters we want to see him do. As recently as how he goes and does a film like *Bridge of Spies*, which although a good film and a great performance, returns him almost whole-handedly back to the good, honest everyday American middle-aged man who's just trying to do his best against all odds in the wildest of circumstances. Checking almost every box I can think of from an American story, to a man that just wants to get back to his wife. And although Hanks shouldn't be held accountable for doing what he wants to do, he is still only fanning the flames of his biggest problem yet as an actor, even though he's ironically at the height of his powers.

Though you'll find that the problem isn't solely in some of Hanks' career choices, but in the culture that he now works in, a modern movie-going audience that has trouble distinguishing celebrity from character and too eagerly agrees with popular opinion/taste. No more exemplified than by the scandal that surfaced at the 86th Academy Awards a couple years ago. In which it was leaked that a number of Academy voters had voted *12 Years A Slave* for Best Picture, without even seeing the film. Huffington Post's entertainment editor Christopher Rosen writes how some members were voting merely on popular opinion/word of mouth and "because, given the film's social relevance, they felt obligated to do so." (Rosen 2). This kind of assumption-based movie-going culture has been grown out of having great resources such as online reviews and Rotten Tomatoes that have made us a

smarter cinema audience in that we demand better movies, but it also makes us less experienced and cultured and far more presumptuous. How many times have you seen a trailer for a movie that you thought might be good, but then heard a few not so stellar reviews and passed on it? I can think of three off the top of my head and they all star The Rock. We are cutting ourselves off from experiencing art, and giving opinions on it, without even giving it a chance. We're tricking ourselves into thinking we are more well versed than the next film fan simply because you read a review.

If we find ourselves stereotyping an artist, whether it's an actor, director, painter, or musician, we need to ask ourselves if we've actually taken in the art we're already making an educated opinion about. We need to learn to be open to new experiences and being affected in new ways by artists who we may think we already know everything about. Take my friend Dylan for example. All my friends hate Justin Bieber. So when Dylan actually enjoys his latest album and asks, "hey do you guys like the new Justin Bieber album," and my friends then proceed to scoff at him; then we're not being open to new experiences. Also we're just being mean to Dylan. Because maybe that new Justin Bieber album is amazing, but we have to learn to drop expectations and wipe away assumptions in service of giving new art your full self. And whether it's in his willingness to do anything; dramatic, comedic, big, small, long, or tall to keep audiences on their toes; as strange as it is to say this at height of his popularity, Tom Hanks is an actor that deserves our full attention. While Hanks is a prime victim of this cinema stereotyping, he also shows us that while it can be the fault of the artist, it can just as much be the fault of ourselves as an audience. But Tom Hanks also gives us an example of an artist that still looks to defy the viewer's blind expectations and battle their unconscious assumptions. As an artist should.



Bibliography:

- Atta, Lucy Van. "A Paradox of Truth and Fiction: Meryl Streep and Acting Modern Realism." *Mercer Street* (n.d.): 83-91. Print.
- Bogart, Anne. "Stereotype." *Writing the Essay Art in the World The World through Art* (2013): 293-301. Print.
- "Tom Hanks." *Www.rottentomatoes.com*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. *Rotten Tomatoes*. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.
- <<http://www.rottentomatoes.com/celebrity/162655641/?search=tom%20h>>.
- "Tom Hanks." *Imdb.com*. N.d. *IMDB*. Web. 26 Feb. 2016.
- <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000158/?ref_=nv_sr_5>.
- Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation." *Cold Bacon* (1964): 1-10. *Www.coldbacon.com*. Web. 22 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.coldbacon.com/writing/sontag-againstinterpretation.html>>.
- Butler, Judith. "DIANE ARBUS: "Surface Tensions: Judith Butler on Diane Arbus" (2004)." *AMERICAN SUBURB X DIANE ARBUS Surface Tensions Judith Butler on Diane Arbus2004 Comments*. N.p., 10 Nov. 2010. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- <<http://www.americansuburbx.com/2010/11/theory-surface-tensions-judith-butler.html>>.
- "Saving Private Ryan." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120815/>>.
- "Cloud Atlas." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1371111/>>.
- "Big." *IMDb*. IMDb.com, n.d. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
- <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094737/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1>.

- Rosen, Christopher. "Two Oscar Voters Picked '12 Years A Slave' Without Watching It." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 5 Mar. 2014. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.
<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/05/oscar-voters-12-years-a-slave_n_4904132.html>.
- Getlen, Larry. "How Tom Hanks Got 'Big' 25 Years Ago." *New York Post How Tom Hanks Got Big 25 Yearsago Comments*. N.p., 07 Dec. 2013. Web. 12 Mar. 2016.
<<http://nypost.com/2013/12/07/how-tom-hanks-got-big-25-years-ago/>>.