

Paglia on Taylor: "A luscious, opulent, ripe fruit!"

Camille Paglia

Camille Paglia considers the "volcanic" Elizabeth Taylor -- and all the unworthy starlets who could never match up

When news broke that Elizabeth Taylor had died at 79, we immediately reached out to founding Salon contributor and lifelong Taylor obsessive Camille Paglia for her thoughts. We found her in a Philadelphia research library researching her new visual arts book for Pantheon, but she diligently trekked outside in the rain to speak to Salon editor-in-chief Kerry Lauerman by telephone under a portico, as the wind howled around her.

I remember reading your essay on Elizabeth Taylor from Penthouse in 1992 (it appeared in the collection "Sex, Art, and American Culture"), where you called her "a pre-feminist woman." You said: "She wields the sexual power that feminism cannot explain and has tried to destroy. Through stars like Taylor, we sense the world-disordering impact of legendary women like Delilah, Salome, and Helen of Troy. Feminism has tried to dismiss the femme fatale as a misogynist libel, a hoary cliché. But the femme fatale expresses women's ancient and eternal control of the sexual realm."

Exactly. At that time, you have to realize, Elizabeth Taylor was still being underestimated as an actress. No one took her seriously -- she would even make jokes about it in public. And when I wrote that piece, Meryl Streep was constantly being touted as the greatest actress who ever lived. I was in total revolt against that and launched this protest because I think that Elizabeth Taylor is actually a greater actress than Meryl Streep, despite Streep's command of a certain kind of technical skill.

As the '90s went on and Turner Classic Movies increasingly became a national institution, people had a chance to see Taylor's old films on a regular rotation, so they came around to her. And then the extent of her power as an actress, and the enormity

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of her achievement in her whole body of films, became evident. As time went on, but obviously past her professional peak, she finally obtained universal respect.

To me, Elizabeth Taylor's importance as an actress was that she represented a kind of womanliness that is now completely impossible to find on the U.S. or U.K. screen. It was rooted in hormonal reality -- the vitality of nature. She was single-handedly a living rebuke to postmodernism and post-structuralism, which maintain that gender is merely a social construct. Let me give you an example. Lisa Cholodenko's "The Kids Are All Right" is a truly wonderful film, but Julianne Moore and Annette Bening -- who is fabulous in it and should have won the Oscar for her portrayal of a prototypical contemporary American career woman -- were painfully scrawny to look at on the screen. This is the standard starvation look that is now projected by Hollywood women stars -- a skeletal, Pilates-honed, anorexic silhouette, which has nothing to do with females as most of the world understands them. There's something almost android about the depictions of women currently being projected by Hollywood.

This was something you've written a lot about, the skinny starlets, the Gwyneth Paltrows ...

If Gwyneth Paltrow were growing up in the 1930s, she would have been treated as a hopelessly gawky wallflower who would be mortified by her lanky figure. But everything about her is being pushed on to American young women as the ultimate ideal. And it's even more unpalatable to me now because I've been spending the last few years speaking in Brazil, and I'm fascinated by Brazilian women -- their humor, energy and openness and the way they express their sexuality so naturally and beautifully. I love it because it's so much like the old Hollywood style. Now Elizabeth Taylor's persona was at first a continuation of Ava Gardner's. They had a natural lustiness and spontaneity, an animal magnetism, though both Ava and Elizabeth at the beginning of their careers didn't have command of basic technical skills, particularly dialogue. That's what people laud Meryl Streep for -- "Oh, her accents are so great; oh, her articulation is so perfect." But she doesn't really live in her characters, she merely costumes them. Meryl Streep is always doing drag. But it's so superficial. It all comes from the brain, not the heart or body.

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Richard Burton, who was supposed to become the next great Shakespearean actor after Laurence Olivier, used to say how much he had learned from Elizabeth about how to work with the camera. Cinematic acting is extremely understated. The slightest little flick of an eyelid says an enormous amount, and that's where Elizabeth Taylor was far superior to Meryl Streep. Streep is always cranking it and cranking it, working it and working it, demanding that the audience bow down and "See what I'm going through! See what I'm doing for you!" Streep is an intelligent, good actress, but she doesn't come anywhere near Elizabeth Taylor on the screen. Because she wasn't a trained stage actress like Streep, Taylor has vocal weaknesses -- at high pitch, she can get a bit screechy -- which is perfect for Martha in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" but not so good for Cleopatra. But she was like a luscious, opulent, ripe fruit. She enjoyed life to the max. She loved to eat and drink, she loved baubles, and she had a terrific sense of humor -- people would say they could hear her raucously laughing from a mile away. She was a basic, down-to-earth gal who could play queens when she had to. The performances she gave were indelible -- for example, that long, long take at the end of "Suddenly, Last Summer" as Catherine finally recalls the way her gay cousin Sebastian was slaughtered and cannibalized by a pack of boys he was trying to pick up!

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Your early obsession with Taylor is well-documented.

Elizabeth Taylor has been a colossal pagan goddess to me since I was 11 or 12. I was so lucky to have seen her at her height. And my sensibility as a culture critic and as a feminist was deeply formed by her. In the U.S. in the 1950s, blondes were the ultimate Aryan ideal. Perky blondes like Doris Day, Debbie Reynolds and Sandra Dee ruled the roost! And then there was Elizabeth Taylor with that gorgeous, brunette, ethnic look. She looked Jewish, Italian, Spanish, even Moorish! She was truly transcultural -- it was a radical resistance to the dominance of the blond sorority queens and cheerleaders. And then her open sexuality in that puritanical period! It was so daring. She picked up one man after another. The tragedy of Mike Todd being killed in a plane crash -- then her stealing Eddie Fisher from Debbie Reynolds. There's no way to describe the joy I felt at the enormous embarrassment she handed to Debbie Reynolds! I've since come to respect both Debbie Reynolds and Doris Day for what fine comedic actresses they were. But at the time, I couldn't stand them! They represented the saccharine, good-girl

style that was being forced on me and my generation by our parents and teachers and every voice in the culture, which was telling us to be like them. Elizabeth Taylor was bad! She was a bad girl! I loved it.

But there were always flickers of strength about her. She wasn't the exaggerated, vulnerable icon Marilyn Monroe was.

That's right. There was a robustness about Elizabeth Taylor, compared to the vulnerability and emotional train wrecks that were Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth. Hayworth also projected a wonderful, melting womanliness on-screen, but Taylor was a tough broad. She had survival instincts. And that's another thing about her, the way she could bounce back from all her tragedies and near-death experiences and draw on her suffering in her acting. Who could forget when she was near death from pneumonia in London in 1961? There were dramatic pictures of her being carried out on a stretcher, when she had an emergency tracheotomy. Then she bounces right back and gets the Oscar! That was one of the great television nights of my entire life, as I watched the Academy Awards and was praying and praying she would win. Then she goes up to the podium with her bosom exposed and her throat bare, with no bandages, not even a band-aid, so everyone could see the scar, and says in a frail, breathy voice, "Thank you so much." I was delirious! I could barely focus the entire next day at school. And then the glorious color photos in Look magazine of her sitting serenely with her Oscar at the after-party -- stunning!

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She won for "Butterfield 8."

"Butterfield 8" was my Bible. She didn't want to make that film. She hated it her whole life. But "Butterfield 8" meant everything to me as an adolescent. It formed so many of my ideas about the pagan tradition descending to us from Babylon and surviving the Christian onslaught of the Middle Ages. The first time you see her in the film, in that tight, white, sewed-on slip, it's so amazing. Her dress is ripped on the floor, she brushes her teeth with scotch, and she goes up to the mirror and angrily writes "No sale!" on it in lipstick! To me she represented the ultimate power of the sexual woman.

There was a long feminist attack on the Hollywood sex symbol as a sex object, a commodified thing, passive to the male gaze, and it's such a crock! "Butterfield 8" really

shows it. There's that incredible moment in the bar where she's wearing a svelte black dress and she and Laurence Harvey are fighting. He grabs her by the arm, and she grinds her stiletto heel into his elegant shoe. It's male vs. female -- a ferocious equal match. He's strong, but she's strong too! That scene shows the power and intensity of heterosexuality, with all its tensions and conflicts. It also shows how terrible current Hollywood filmmaking is -- how false and manufactured sex has become. There's no real eroticism anymore. "Butterfield 8" sizzles with eroticism, because of the psychological distance and animal attraction between male and female. The businessmen in that film are all in their uniforms, their black suits. They're like a horde of identical and characterless myrmidons or clones. They have wealth, they have power, but they're nothing compared to her! The film truly captures the complexities and struggles of sexuality -- all of which have been lost in our period of easy gender-bending. Everything's become so bland and boring now.

The era of the great movie queens is certainly over. Sharon Stone did have her solar moment in "Basic Instinct." Not just in the famous interrogation scene in the police station but everywhere in that film, she was commanding sex and commanding the camera. It was a spectacular performance -- and then the movie kind of self-destructs. But I had a brief moment of hope there -- I thought, is Hollywood sex finally coming back? But no, they never could come up with anything that good for Sharon Stone again, and the moment faded.

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Is there really no one else who has made that sort of splash? I'm having a hard time coming up with one. Angelina Jolie, perhaps?

For me, Jolie's greatest performance was in "Gia," where she played the bisexual fashion model Gia Carangi, who died of AIDS. Jolie is amazing in that. She had the sensuality and animal energy of Ava Gardner, which virtually no one has been able to duplicate. But after she got huge around the world, Jolie decided to become the big humanitarian. Elizabeth Taylor did that, but it was later in her career. So suddenly Angelina Jolie thinks she's a U.N. ambassador for all human misery in the world. Everything turns high concept, and soon she's collecting a multiracial menagerie of children. The result is a total flattening out of her artistic image. In a way, she suffers from the problem of being a star in the age of paparazzi, where you're much more

hounded than even Elizabeth Taylor ever was. Marilyn Monroe was certainly harassed by the press and hated it, but not like today, where there's hardly a place on earth to have your own thoughts. So Angelina Jolie became defensive and covert, and now there's something too calculated and manipulative about her public persona, so she's less interesting than she was. Of course, there are no great roles being written for her. She gets action adventure scripts, like Lara Croft, where a contemporary woman has to show she's tough and can duke it out with the guys. But I'm not sure Jolie would have been able to handle some of the roles Elizabeth Taylor did so well like "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." There's a relaxation at the heart of Elizabeth Taylor's acting style -- and also in Elizabeth Taylor the woman-- whereas you always feel a wariness or tension in Jolie.

We're in a period now where everything has to be taut -- in mind and body. And part of it is that we're in the post-studio era. Elizabeth Taylor was a creation of the old Hollywood studio system -- she was one of the last great studio products. And in the studio, you were very protected as you grew up. It was a family environment, which some people -- like Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis -- found claustrophobic. But it was very nurturing for someone like Elizabeth Taylor. Angelina Jolie, however, had a kind of hard, unsettled, up-and-down life. She's tough, she's a survivor, she's a little bit cynical. But you never feel cynicism in Elizabeth Taylor -- never! She does it when she has to play it, as in "Virginia Woolf," but it isn't her. There was never an ounce of cynicism in her. To all reports, she was a warm and maternal woman.

And that's another thing -- all these stars today, accumulating children with an army of nannies. Despite all her children, no one would ever call Angelina Jolie maternal. But Elizabeth Taylor's maternal quality is central to her heterosexual power. Elizabeth Taylor could control men. She liked men. And men liked her. There was a chemistry between her and men, coming from her own maternal instincts. I've been writing about this for years, and it was partly inspired by watching Taylor operate on-screen and off. The happy and successful heterosexual woman feels tender and maternal toward men -- but this has been completely lost in our feminist era. Now women tell men, you have to be my companion and be just like a woman; be my best friend, and listen to me chatter. In other words, women don't really like men anymore -- they want men to be like women. But Elizabeth Taylor liked men, and men loved to be around her because they sensed that.

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But she was no pushover! She gave as good as she got. There were those famous knock-down, drag-out fights with Burton, and she loved it. No man ever ruled her. Not for a second. But at the same time her men weren't henpecked. She liked strong men. That was one reason she dropped Eddie Fisher. Evidently, according to Carrie Fisher in her one-woman show, he was quite renowned in the sack, and Taylor went for that. But then she realized he was no Mike Todd or Richard Burton, and he got the boot.

We've spent almost 30 minutes talking about a very small part of her career, but she's been such a public figure, decades later, in very different ways.

Right! On the way to the library this morning, I was listening to New York's WABC on the car radio, and they were saying how all the interns think that Elizabeth Taylor was just Michael Jackson's friend or "that crazy old lady in a wheelchair." For many people who are older, however, our lives were permeated by her for decades. She affected us on the deepest emotional level.

It's interesting what a profound rapport she always had with gay men, beginning with Montgomery Clift. She was a great friend and counselor to him early on, when he was struggling with his homosexuality. Then when he had that terrible car crash that deformed his face, I've read that she ran down the road to his aid and saved his life by pulling his tongue out of his throat. It was a bloody scene -- he was choking to death. She always had a gift for intimate communication with both gay and straight men.

Is there anyone we're missing, though? Is there no one else who captures, as you've called it, her raw, lush sensuality?

I would say there's no one else in Hollywood. However, there are a number of examples in the European tradition -- authentically sexual and maternal stars like Sophia Loren, who has the same combination of qualities. Loren's tenderness toward men is so obvious. At the same time, she's very strong -- a working-class Italian woman who survived the war. And then you have the French actresses, like Jeanne Moreau, whose overt sexuality is fabulous. But Moreau has a kind of decadent quality that Elizabeth Taylor never had. Moreau's eroticism was tinged with a sophisticated world weariness -- something a bit haggard: "I've seen it all. What can you show me?" The French actresses can also project such a delicate femininity. Catherine Deneuve, for example, shows such

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genuine emotion and sensitivity, but she's always cool. She's an observer, a little detached. I adore Deneuve, but she's not like Elizabeth Taylor, who is volcanic. Taylor is all gusto and fire.

She lived life to its fullest. There hasn't been anyone quite like her. I mean, we've had some high-energy, bawdy, over-the-top actresses like Stockard Channing and Bette Midler, and they're very endearing, but there's always something slightly ironic about them.

They're in on the joke.

They're campy. But Taylor was so instinctive and intuitive, so in the moment. It was pretty remarkable that someone with such a strong personality could also be such a good actress. Usually, actors who can project themselves into so many different types of roles tend to have a kind of fluid, unfixed identity in real life. But Elizabeth Taylor's personality was rock solid. At the same time, she was always ready to throw on costumes from any era and look magnificent. She was a real trouper, a pro. By the way, do you notice how we're calling her an "actress"? The minute Hollywood actresses decided to become "actors," they lost their sexuality. It's time to junk that pretentious term.

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You famously collected 599 photos of Elizabeth Taylor when you were a teenager. Which one should we use to illustrate this interview?

The canonical shot of Elizabeth Taylor sewn into that white slip in "Butterfield 8" is one of the major art images of my entire life! She is Babylonian pagan woman -- the goddess Ishtar, the anti-Mary!

That photo heralds the dawning sexual revolution, among other things. But the leading feminists totally rejected the Hollywood sex symbols from the start. Raquel Welch was still complaining about that when I interviewed her for *Tatler* in 1994. Gloria Steinem wouldn't even let Raquel speak at an abortion rights rally in the 1970s. Puritanical fools! But thanks to Madonna, the pro-sex, pro-pop wing of feminism rose with a vengeance in the 1990s and swept the prudes into the dust bin of history.

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