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“I Don’t See Any Method At All”: The Problem of Actorly Transformation

KEVIN ESCH

Captain Willard (Martin Sheen): “They told me that you had gone totally insane, and that your methods were unsound.”

Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando): “Are my methods unsound?”

Captain Willard: “I don’t see any method at all, sir.”

—*Apocalypse Now*

IN 1980, HAVING PREVIOUSLY GARNERED AN ACADEMY AWARD for Best Supporting Actor as Vito Corleone in *The Godfather Part II* (1974)—a character first played by Marlon Brando—Robert De Niro received the Best Actor Oscar for his performance of Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*. It was a performance that, then as now, proved difficult to ignore. The commercial and critical consensus suggested that, whatever the considerable merits of Martin Scorsese’s contributions, most of the film’s impact derived from De Niro’s acting; Louis Menand even argues that “everything Scorsese does is contrived to let that performance stand at the center of our attention” (61). Though *Raging Bull* and Scorsese lost Best Picture and Best Director honors to Robert Redford’s *Ordinary People* (a decision still ridiculed by film critics), by decade’s end the film was at the top of best-of lists in *Premiere* and *Time*, and it is now listed on the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress.

De Niro’s astonishing sixty-pound weight gain for the scenes of La Motta’s later years was heavily publicized and dominated reviews of the film. Like the Oscar victories, which suggested De Niro as the Method heir to Brando, critics linked the performance to an earlier generation of Method actors, particularly

Brando. The film itself famously makes the connection in the final scene, as an aging La Motta rehearses for a nightclub routine by reciting Brando’s legendary “I couldah been a contenda” speech from *On the Waterfront* (1954). Echoing the tempest of debate that had swirled around Brando and the Method performers in the 1950s, however, many critics felt something missing in De Niro’s role, even as they were overwhelmed by it. “What De Niro does in this picture isn’t acting, exactly,” writes Pauline Kael. “I’m not sure what it is. Though it may at some level be awesome, it definitely isn’t pleasurable” (874). Andrew Sarris’s review says De Niro outdoes Lon Chaney “in wreaking havoc on one’s metabolism for the sake of shocking and depressing [his] audience,” and concludes by revisiting that final nightclub scene: “. . . I can only gasp at the deeply affecting aptness and audacity and virtuosity of the conceit. Between them, De Niro and Scorsese and their associates end up with a breathtakingly new dimension of memory and regret. If only I could feel the slightest moral resonance as well, but I don’t, and that makes all the difference” (55).

The dichotomies evident in the critical reception to De Niro’s performance in *Raging Bull*—adulation mixed with disapproval and disgust, recognition of an extraordinary devotion to craft mixed with uncertainty about whether it qualifies as craft at all—are typical of this unprecipitated but increasingly common approach to

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acting that I will call “actorly transformation.” How do we make sense of a performance movement that seems on one hand utterly senseless, even dangerous, and on the other hand exceptionally dedicated and even (given the attention it often receives) financially shrewd? What relation does it have to the first generation of Method actors, to which it is frequently linked (as in the scene from *Raging Bull*) but which had a markedly different attitude toward the actor’s instrument, the human body? While actorly transformation has sometimes been seen as only an expression of exercise culture and weight-loss fads, these explanations fail to consider the impact of vast changes in the Hollywood entertainment industry since the Method’s cultural zenith in the 1950s. As both David Cook and Jon Lewis have described, the 1970s and 1980s saw Hollywood’s corporate structure and financing strategies shift profoundly, toward a business model premised on diversification and risk aversion. As an example, the related industry devoted to insuring (and, increasingly, policing) actors has attempted to graft a culture of personal responsibility onto an industry culturally defined by excess. For these reasons, Hollywood became less tolerant of the kind of rebellious artistry generally associated with the Method—even as it strove to preserve its audacious reputation—and the opportunity arose for an approach to acting that evoked the Method’s behavioral extremes at the same time that it fetishized discipline.

A New “Method”

The term *actorly transformation* is meant to separate this mode of performance from other popular forms of body or facial alteration that film actors have employed. Actorly transformation has two distinguishing characteristics: first, the actor’s body itself must be transformed through concentrated, film-specific, self-imposed body alteration—especially weight gain or loss—not simply through prosthetic enhancement (although prosthetics may sometimes accompany it); second, the stated purpose of said transformation must be greater

fidelity of performance, not merely screen idolatry and/or sexual appeal.

Changing an actor’s appearance through makeup or prosthetics, for example, has a long and distinguished history in film performance, and certain actors were acclaimed for their remarkable series of guises. Paul Muni, who was nominated for five Academy Awards during his career and won for the title role in *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (1935), became well known for his extensive research and makeup enhancement in films like *Louis Pasteur*, *The Good Earth* (1937), *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), and *Juarez* (1939). By at least one account, his interpretation of Zola was uncanny: “[A] Frenchman, then resident in Los Angeles, who saw *The Life of Emile Zola* . . . [said] the characterization of Zola by Paul Muni was perfect not only in makeup but also in peculiarities of movement and speech. This witness to the film’s authenticity had known Emile Zola personally and had been present at the trial of Captain Dreyfus” (van den Ecker 330).

The actor who won the most acclaim for his radical physical changes, as Andrew Sarris notes in his *Raging Bull* review, was Lon Chaney, “Man of a Thousand Faces” (and honored in a biopic of the same title starring James Cagney). Chaney’s corporeal expressiveness may be the closest historical precursor to the actorly transformation trend. Voted most popular male box-office star by theatrical exhibitors in 1928 and 1929—a notable span because it bridges the transition to sound, which was so difficult for many silent performers—Chaney employed his famous makeup case (donated to the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles after his death in 1930) to create fantastical physiognomies in such films as *Oliver Twist* (1922), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), *Phantom of the Opera* (1925), and *Mr. Wu* (1927).¹ He regularly portrayed characters who are (or are pretending to be) missing limbs or suffering other disfigurements. Chaney’s dedication often drove him to painful bodily contortions in the service of a role, like the criminal genius Blizzard from *The Penalty* (1920), a film that “lingers over Chaney’s ability to manipulate his

body, strapped into a harness to make it appear as if his legs are amputated at the knees” (Studlar 234). Despite the extraordinary physical dedication to these roles, however, there is no indication that either Chaney or Muni chose, as an alternative to makeup and prosthetics, to gain or lose weight or otherwise change their bodies for a part.

Also distinct from the actorly transformation under discussion is the trend, beginning in the action movies of the 1980s, for stars to develop their bodies through bodybuilding, becoming themselves a site of spectacle within the bombast of the film. With precedents in the work of some earlier actors (Steve Reeves, e.g.), the tendency was popularized by Sylvester Stallone in the *Rocky* and *Rambo* films, Linda Hamilton in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), and the paradigmatic Arnold Schwarzenegger throughout his film career; it has been carried on more recently by stars like Brad Pitt in *Fight Club* (1991) and *Troy* (2004) and Hugh Jackman in *X-Men* (2000). Other actors, such as Keanu Reeves in *Speed* (1994), have signaled changes in career direction by bulking up while also switching over to the action genre. Yet since action cinema has been the primary domain where actors have dramatized their bodies in this way, these transformations are not discussed in “actorly” terms—as signs of dedication to the craft of acting. Instead, these performances and films have been viewed symptomatically, as examples of Reaganite ideology or reactions to undermined masculinity in a postindustrial economy.² Stallone’s work in *Cop Land* (1997), on the other hand—as an aging sheriff of a troubled Jersey town, a role for which he stopped exercising and added several inches to his midriff—is a perfect example of strategic “actorly transformation” as a way of reinvigorating an aging actor’s career.

Considerable controversy has attended this new turn in Method acting, both within the academic community and among outside observers. Many film actors regard actorly transformation for a role as an unnecessary, even unprofessional indulgence. Laurence Olivier’s now-legendary instruction to Dustin Hoffman

on the set of *Marathon Man* (1976) sets the tone for the prevailing counterargument to the extremes of the new Method. At one point during the shoot, Hoffman stayed up all night to lend authenticity to his character’s insomnia; the Shakespearean-trained Olivier responded to his bedraggled costar, “Why don’t you try acting, dear boy?”³ Similar attitudes are apparent in numerous interviews with actors. “Listen, I feel very strongly,” the actor Lindsay Crouse has said, “and I teach my students this: you’re either an actor or you’re not. . . . For the most part, going to that extreme is bull, that’s someone who is not an actor. You don’t have to cut your leg off at the hip to play a paraplegic” (qtd. in Zucker 28). Crouse’s example, whether intentionally or not, recalls Marlon Brando’s first starring role in Fred Zinnemann’s social problem film *The Men* (1950). Brando received critical acclaim for his performance as a paraplegic war veteran piecing his life back together in a stateside veterans’ hospital—a role for which Brando prepared by spending several months with paraplegic vets. Crouse, who studied with Uta Hagen and Sanford Meisner, goes on to say that an actor’s body is an instrument that needs to be disciplined, but not abused, in the service of a part. The alternative “is like telling a sculptor he has to mutilate himself in order to learn how to chop away at a block” (qtd. in Zucker 28). Like Olivier, Crouse believes that a line exists beyond which an actor abandons his professionalism in the pursuit of a role.

Robert De Niro frequently surfaces in these interviews as the apotheosis of this kind of extreme acting preparation. According to Eli Wallach, a founding member of and frequent moderator at the Actors Studio:

There are some actors who, if they’re going to play a coal miner, have to go down a mine and spend 3 months in a mine and get dirty and know what the life is like, right? Some actors don’t have to go down in the mine. They put dirt on their face, they come up out of their mineshaft, and you say, “Gee, there’s a coal miner.” Right? One does it literally, the other imagines, and I fit into the latter group, the imagining-what-it’s-like.

I've just been reading about De Niro, who's a wonderful actor, but he's been playing this catatonic [*Awakenings*, 1990], spending three months in this hospital and two months in that one. And that's where all the hype and the publicity is. (qtd. in Zucker 161)

In itself, Wallach's description of De Niro's preparation to play a catatonic is little different from Brando's preparation for *The Men*, alluded to by Lindsay Crouse. Yet for this long-time Method actor, De Niro seems to stand for something larger: a tendency toward overvaluing performances of physically or psychologically damaged or otherwise marginal characters, in large part due to the demands of physical fidelity undertaken by the actor for the role. Richard Dreyfuss, who never trained formally, goes even further, arguing that this "something larger" is the Actors Studio itself:

Someone who really minimized the power of acting, the most damaging influence to the American theatrical culture—and culture even in a larger sense—was Lee Strasberg. . . . There's an old story about what you had to do in order to be able to get into Shakespeare's Globe Theater—you had to be an actor, a dancer, a mime, a juggler, a singer, and you had to play kings and peasants, princes and angels. None of this is demanded of us. After World War II, Lee Strasberg basically said, "No, you have to play just this narrow spectrum," and Stella Adler said, "No, it's not, it's bigger than that," and she was exiled. All of my generation suffers from this; I suffer from it. Bobby De Niro, who, in my opinion, is the finest actor of my generation and who could do almost anything, would be that much better had we not all been so terribly influenced by the restrictions put on us by Strasberg. (qtd. in Zucker 80)

Whether or not one agrees with Wallach's and Dreyfuss' assessments, however, one cannot deny that in the last two decades of Hollywood filmmaking, since De Niro and *Raging Bull*, much of "the hype and the publicity" has been given to roles of this sort. For purposes of historical analysis, debating the aesthetic merits

of these performances is beside the point. In order to assess how important this acting trend has become for a popular understanding of "serious" acting, we can look at the most highly visible and economically productive arbiter of Hollywood acting success, the Academy Awards. The Oscars are generally considered the most prestigious awards ceremony for the Hollywood film industry, and as the year's ultimate honors after a stream of awards leading up to them, the Oscars also receive the most publicity, with speculation beginning well before nominees are announced and intensifying until the winners are announced several weeks later. In addition, films that win or are nominated for Academy Awards can benefit greatly at the box office, particularly contenders for Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Actress. According to one study of Oscar's worth at the box office, films that were nominated or that won survived longer in distribution, played on more screens nationally, and showed increased revenue per screen (Nelson et al 1–16). Following the awards, of course, Oscar glory also becomes a way both to market actors in future films and for actors to justify greater compensation. Simply put, whatever fellow actors or film critics may think of actorly transformation, it has a real and measurable impact on the Hollywood industry and its place in public perception.

Taking 1980 and De Niro's Oscar for *Raging Bull* as a starting point, and considering every actor nominated for each of the acting awards (Best Actor/Actress and Best Supporting Actor/Actress) up through the 2004 Academy Awards, the results, even if unscientific, are startling. Twenty-seven actors have been nominated for or received Oscars in leading or supporting roles that advertised weight gain or loss or other bodily transformation—an average of more than one a year. More tellingly, the numbers have risen significantly from one decade to the next: six were nominated or won in the 1980s, nine in the 1990s (four in 1998 and 1999 alone), and twelve in the first half of the 2000s. A brief survey of these roles indicates that while weight gain or loss is sometimes the primary "special effect"—as with De Niro in *Rag-*

ing Bull, Jack Nicholson in *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), Edward Norton in *American History X* (1998), or Renée Zellweger in both *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Cold Mountain* (2003)—it is frequently part of a larger arsenal of physical and prosthetic alteration—the disguising makeup Ben Kingsley sported in addition to his weight loss for *Gandhi* (1982), for example, or more recently the prosthetic jaw, jagged false teeth, mottled skin, and dark contact lenses that helped Charlize Theron become the heavier-set serial killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster* (2003).⁴ When combined with corporeal transformation, these supplemental changes (and the time-intensive preparations that accompany them) reinforce the rhetoric of dedication to crafting a “true” performance. As Stephen Holden writes of Theron’s performance, “At the very least the disappearance of the cool and creamy blond star into the body of a ruddy, bedraggled street person is an astounding cosmetic stunt. But Ms. Theron’s transformation . . . is not just a matter of surfaces” (E1).

Given the financial benefits reaped from the exposure and aesthetic approval these films receive from the Academy Awards, we can say that this groundswell of actorly transformation has had an impact far greater than even the number of Oscar nominations suggests. Although the box-office figures of even the most award-winning film tend today to be surpassed by seasonal blockbusters—many more people saw Will Smith in *Men in Black* (1997) than in his Oscar-nominated role in *Ali* (2001), for example—we can safely say that prized performances are viewed far more, on average, than performances that win no awards, and are projected on a greater number of American screens. In fact, award-winning performances are a means of justifying the continued investment in smaller films that have less broad-based appeal.

Of course, a number of other performances in recent decades have used actorly transformation as part of their technique without receiving Oscars for their troubles. A sampling would include actors who have been nominated for other transformations (De Niro in *The*

Untouchables [1987], Tom Hanks in *Road to Perdition* [2002], Nicolas Cage in *Kiss of Death* [1995], and Jamie Foxx in *Ali*) as well as many who have not (Matt Damon in *Courage Under Fire* [1996] and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* [1999], Toni Collette in *Muriel's Wedding* [1994], Benicio del Toro in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* [1998], Vincent D'Onofrio in *Full Metal Jacket* [1997] and *The Salton Sea* [2002], Val Kilmer in *Joe the King* [1999], and Christian Bale in *The Machinist* [2004]). Yet the prevailing attitude among observers is that such roles are far more likely to receive awards than other roles. Caryn James has written in the *New York Times*, on the occasion of Christian Bale’s extraordinary sixty-three-pound weight loss for *The Machinist*, “It’s one of the surest gambits in Oscar-dom: if an actor suddenly looks dangerously thin or unglamorously plump, that’s acting!” James explains the trend sociologically by linking it to the American obsession with weight, dieting, and plastic surgery, postulating that moviegoers desperate to reconfigure their own bodies are fascinated by an actor’s ability to lay waste to his or her figure and then restore it afterward with the help of personal trainers.

While there may be some truth to this, James doesn’t account for Americans’ long-standing interest in nutrition, diet fads, and exercise. At least as early as the 1910s and 1920s, the numerous books and articles penned under Douglas Fairbanks’s name emphasized the character-building virtues of exercise and clean living: “I see it,” he wrote, “as the great antidote for the softening and demoralizing effect of too much civilization” (qtd. in Studlar 46). In his two histories of American eating habits, Harvey Levenstein has traced these habits from what he calls the “New Nutrition,” which in the 1890s first informed people about proteins, carbohydrates, and fats; to the “Newer Nutrition” of the Depression era, with its focus on vitamins and sufficient nutrient intake; to the drive to reduce consumption, which he terms the “Negative Nutrition.” This last period looks most immediate to us today, though it originated in the postwar period as health-consciousness and gained ascendancy by the late 1950s as fash-

ion-consciousness, with the popularity of diet cookbooks, liquid-meal substitutes, and “low-cal” grocery products (Levenstein, 136–37). Yet this history raises the question of why actorly transformation did not become a force in Hollywood acting until the 1980s. Why was this not part of the Method approach of the 1950s?

Taming the Method, or, Brando’s Weight Problem

“There are few spectacles corporate America enjoys more than a good counterculture,” Thomas Frank has observed (145). The extraordinary success of the Method in 1950s Hollywood owed a great deal to the industry’s embrace and nourishing of rebellion. Method acting was actively marketed as a revolt against standard performance practice, though in fact, as Cynthia Baron has pointed out, it shared many similarities with the long-established acting traditions taught in the studios’ acting schools. A 1954 article in *Life* magazine, exemplifying the publicizing of the “new” attitude toward performance, documents Actors Studio members Natalie Wood and Dennis Hopper sitting at the counter of a late-night diner, observing the clientele, absorbing the atmosphere, so that they might later use what they have found in their own acting. A street accident provides the same opportunity, with the actors noting the activities of the ambulance drivers. Not only are these actors being shown taking their lessons from life, the environments they are found in are only marginally respectable, on the fringes of the societal mainstream.

The Hollywood industry, battered on multiple fronts in the 1950s, found in the Method a means to revitalize its product and its cultural cachet with a new, younger, postwar audience. The rebellious lifestyles of a select few young Method actors became as much a part of the Method mythology as the acting itself, so much so that a 1971 book entitled *Rebels: The Rebel Hero in Films* was virtually (and implicitly) a Method history as well, with chapters on John Garfield, the first Studio member to succeed

in Hollywood (“The Rebel Hero: Launched and Almost Lost”), Montgomery Clift (“New Rebel Hero Stars Emerge”), Brando, and James Dean. In fact, of the ten “rebel heroes” on one two-page photo spread in the book, seven are associated with the Method (Garfield, Clift, Brando, Dean, Paul Newman, Warren Beatty, and Dustin Hoffman), with Frank Sinatra, Steve McQueen, and Peter Fonda rounding out the list (Morella and Epstein 8–9). There is little need here to rehearse the numerous stories, recounted in dozens of biographies, of countercultural dalliance, sexual indiscretion and exploration, profligacy with drugs and alcohol, and vehicular recklessness that have been erected around many of these stars. Even a tragic figure only tangentially connected to the Method, Marilyn Monroe, has been affected in remembrance by virtue of her brief study at the Actors Studio. Lee Strasberg, who eulogized Monroe at her funeral, lends artistic credibility to her career by association, even as he enhances the sense of a troubled life lost too soon.⁵

The rebellious reputation of the Method and its adherents had at least one significant drawback for the industry, however. Simply put, the dangerous lives led by some of the most visible Method actors considerably shortened or otherwise damaged their careers, resulting in reduced return on investment for their studios. Clift’s alcoholism and drug abuse were notorious, causing complications on the sets of *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and Hitchcock’s *I Confess* (1953) and contributing to his car crash during the production of *Raintree County* (1957). His drug use, including painkillers, increased following reconstructive surgery, which left his fluid features less flexible; by the time of his death in 1966, Clift’s eccentricities had so worn out his welcome with journalists that obituaries variously described him as “maverick” (kindly), “strange and impenetrable,” “a victim without a cause,” and part of an acting movement that had become “embarrassingly obsolete” (Larsen; Pacey; Thom; Long).

Dean, prior to the crash that ended his life on 30 September 1955, had already become

an insurance risk to Warner Bros., and a clause had been put in his contract for *Giant* (1956) stipulating no race-car driving until his work on the film was complete; the accident occurred soon after he filmed his last scene. Graham McCann relates the aftermath:

Rebel Without a Cause and *Giant* were both released posthumously. *Rebel* opened on 3 October 1955—three days after Dean's death. One studio executive is said to have looked at the posters of Dean's movies and said, "Great career move, kid." The date "9/30/55" was painted on walls, carved into school desks and printed on to T-shirts. Three thousand people attended his funeral in Fairmount—dwarfing the local population. A year later, Dean's studio was still receiving two thousand fan letters per week addressed to the dead star. . . .

. . . At Dean's funeral Pastor Xen Harvey had said, "The career of James Dean has not ended. It has just begun. And God himself is directing the production." (162–63)

As seductive as the idea of Dean's career turning on a fateful car crash may be, however, it merits additional scrutiny. Dean's first film performance in *East of Eden* (1955) had been well received, despite or because of his stylistic indebtedness to Clift and Brando, actors whom he worshipped and who served as models for his own acting. By most accounts, Dean was just beginning to find his own distinctive approach. Of course it is only a parlor game to wonder what Dean might have become—and how much more the studios might have profited—given twenty more years and films. What is clear, though, is that, while Hollywood's history is peppered with figures, like Dean and Monroe, whose posthumous legends dwarfed their lifetime earnings, a sound business model hardly welcomes such accidents. Converting these stars into profitable dead icons could in fact be viewed as a necessary strategy to re-coup lost capital.

Brando, the only one of the three Method myth-heroes to avoid a premature career end and to live and work into old age, has been the

most long-standing representative of that era. As such he deserves more detailed examination. Following his death in 2004, the media eulogized him with countless articles. Most of the stories were as predictable in their focus as in their omissions, and studying these remembrances reveals the conflicted cultural legacy left behind by Brando and, by extension, the Method. The general tone of the popular eulogy can be summed up by the opening paragraph of the *New York Times* obituary, in which Brando was called "the rebellious prodigy who electrified a generation and forever transformed the art of screen acting but whose obstinacy and eccentricity prevented him from fully realizing the promise of his early genius" (Lyman). Another obituary describes him more colloquially as "never quite Hollywood's cup of tea" (Jacobs). Brando's death afforded the press an opportunity not so much to reexamine his life as to rehearse an already off-played script. It begins with the revelatory early successes at the Actors Studio, on Broadway in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), and in his films with director Elia Kazan, especially the adaptation of *Streetcar* and *On the Waterfront*, for which he won his first Academy Award.

The next stage of Brando's popular history might take as its starting point the notorious profile that appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1957. Written by Truman Capote, "The Duke in His Domain" takes place in Kyoto during the filming of *Sayonara* (1957) and is one of the first sustained accounts of Brando that focuses less on his acting and more on his eccentric and difficult nature. The portrait was so revealing, in fact, that Brando—who had been warned about Capote by director Josh Logan—threatened briefly to sue Capote (Manso 428–34). One passage worth quoting at length heralds a shift in attitude about the actor from his 1947 triumph in *Streetcar* to his role ten years later as "the Valentino of the bop generation." Capote's first encounter with Brando was during rehearsals for the Broadway production, a moment he recalls as the voice of the present Brando goes on and on, "as though speaking to hear itself":

Elia Kazan, the director of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, said at that time, and has recently repeated, "Marlon is just the best actor in the world." But ten years ago, on the remembered afternoon, he was still relatively unknown; at least, I hadn't a clue to who he might be when, arriving too early at the *Streetcar* rehearsal, I found the auditorium deserted and a brawny young man stretched out atop a table on the stage. . . . I took him for a stagehand. Or did until I looked closely at his face. It was as if a stranger's head had been attached to the brawny body, as in certain counterfeit photographs. For this face was so very untough, superimposing, as it did, an almost angelic refinement and gentleness upon hard-jawed good looks. . . . Not the least suggestion of [Tennessee] Williams' unpoetic Kowalski. It was therefore an experience to observe, later that afternoon, with what chameleon ease Brando acquired the character's cruel and gaudy colors, how superbly, like a guileful salamander, he slithered into the part, how his own persona evaporated—just as, in this Kyoto hotel room ten years afterward, my 1947 memory of Brando receded, disappeared into his 1957 self. And the present Brando, the one lounging there on the *tatami* and lazily puffing filtered cigarettes as he talked and talked, was, of course, a different person—bound to be. His body was thicker; his forehead was higher. . . . His eyes had changed. Although their *caffè-espresso* color was the same, the shyness, any traces of real vulnerability that they had formerly held, had left them; now he looked at people with assurance, and with what can only be called a pitying expression, as though he dwelt in spheres of enlightenment where they, to his regret, did not. (359–60)

Capote renders Brando as an artist whose self-absorption and sense of entitlement have begun to counteract his artistry (a perception that would come to define Capote as well⁶). The result is a portrait of a difficult actor. Josh Logan admits to Capote that he feels "something lacking in his rapport" with Brando—a communication problem exacerbated by the time he spent trying to salvage a failing relationship with the

Shochiku film company and Shochiku's reluctance to grant access to Japan's theatrical activities for the production. For his part, Brando expresses frustration over the script and boasts to Capote, seriously or not, "I give up. I'm going to walk through the part, and that's that. Sometimes I think nobody knows the difference anyway" (364). Though ultimately Brando's performance in *Sayonara* garnered him a third Oscar nomination, Capote's piece signaled a shift in the public attitude toward him—and it drew attention as well to the corporeal changes that would more and more define him in his later career.

As Brando's career moved into the 1960s, his box-office power declined; he wouldn't return to the roster of top ten stars until 1972's *The Godfather*. Increasingly, Brando sabotaged productions he was involved with or otherwise embarrassed the Hollywood industry, to considerable press retribution. The disastrous remake of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962), whose twenty-six-million-dollar final budget was at the time eclipsed only by that of *Cleopatra* (1963), was blamed exclusively on Brando's tempestuous behavior on set and his insistence on star treatment on location in Tahiti (including having the Sunday *New York Times* sent to him, at the cost of \$27.94 per week) (Carey 156). A *Saturday Evening Post* cover story, "Six Million Dollars Down the Drain: The Mutiny of Marlon Brando," even quoted Robert Wise's prediction that *Bounty*, along with *Cleopatra*, portended "the end of the star system as it exists in Hollywood today" (qtd. in Manso 548). Though placing the blame for the film's overrun budget, let alone the collapse of the star system, solely on Brando's shoulders was surely unfair, MGM's falling stock prices during the production indicated that Brando had become a financial liability and an insurance risk to anyone seeking to employ him. Despite his temporary return to Hollywood's good graces with *The Godfather* and Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1973)—a foreign film which nevertheless became an American *succès de scandale*—Brando's unreliability was only reconfirmed by his rejection of the Academy Award for playing Vito

Corleone, the first such dismissal in the history of the ceremony.⁷

However, the most literally visible evidence of Brando's unpredictability was his constantly fluctuating weight and the problems it caused to his work and reputation, never more so than during this period in the 1960s and 70s. When Capote remarked on Brando's thickness and contrasted it to his lithe muscularity in *Streetcar*, he introduced the before-and-after structure common to discussions of Brando today—the T-shirted young star gracing one side of the obituary, the Tahitian recluse of Wellesian proportions occupying the other. Yet Brando was preoccupied with his weight and eating habits throughout his life. The index to Peter Manso's hefty biography contains fifty-four references to Brando's weight problems and eating habits. Manso reports the actor's penchant for consuming entire jars of peanut butter and boxes of Mallomars. What makes this more than mere gossip titillation, though, are the financial and artistic conflicts resulting from Brando's weight problems and his vanity about his weight. The costume designer on *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961) had to accommodate his changes in bulk by installing elastic in Brando's shirts and trousers, which he still regularly split (Manso 488). He dieted and lost twenty pounds for *The Appaloosa* (1966), as a promise to director Sidney Furie, but gained it back during the shoot; a body double was substituted for him in several shots (Manso 612–16). His weight ballooned from 170 to 210 during the elongated production of *Mutiny* (Carey 162). Bernardo Bertolucci shot Brando's one nude scene in *Last Tango in Paris* with the star and Maria Schneider entwined, to hide his excess fat. Schneider later said, "I wasn't excited by him, although my friends told me I should be, and I don't think he was excited by me. He's old, almost fifty, you know, and he's flabby and he has a big . . . [she gestures to indicate a pot belly]. And he was very uptight about it" (qtd. in Thompson 68).

By far the most extreme complications were yet to come, however. In preparing for the role of Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, Brando,

weighing in the 240s, admitted himself to a Los Angeles hospital for controlled fasting. Despite this, he was still severely overweight when he arrived in the Philippines, and Francis Ford Coppola and his crew were forced to reconceptualize the character, whom Joseph Conrad describes in *Heart of Darkness* as withered and gaunt. "I instantly thought I'd play him as fat," Coppola remembers, "and show him as a guy who'd gone to seed. But he did not want to be portrayed as fat. I said, 'Marlon, what am I to do? I can't show you as a trim military guy, as the character is in the [John] Milius script. I can show you as a man who is indulging his senses, but you don't want me to'" (qtd. in Cowie 77). Instead, rather than using Brando's size as part of a fully realized character, Coppola and cinematographer Vittorio Storaro were forced to obscure his girth, shooting in close-up and with chiaroscuro lighting, both of which contributed to an ultimately static, confused characterization.

The difficulty in "reading" Brando as Kurtz is apparent from reviews of the film. John Simon writes that "Brando . . . has become an ob-scene, secular Buddha with shaven head and ballooning midriff, whose voice emerges like the squeal of a mouse from a ridiculous mountain" (1247). Veronica Geng, suggesting even more clearly an otherworldly critical distance from Kurtz, says, "Vittorio Storaro's camera reveres Brando's shaved skull, defined by a crescent of light, the way [Stanley Kubrick's] *2001* reveres the solar system" (72). By contrast, Anthony Lane, writing about Coppola's "director's cut" *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001), points out a revelatory new scene where Brando appears in full daylight:

[F]or the first and only time . . . we get to observe that massive boulder of a head, as steady with threat as any of the carved sculptures that encrust his temple. . . . Kurtz in the shadows was pure mystery, but the visible Kurtz has a proud Roman madness, like something from the final volume of Gibbon, that harks back sadly to Brando's Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, and urges you to

consider Coppola's movie less as a quest into the unknown and more as a meditation on the American imperium. . . . (354–55)

For Lane, the added scene literally fleshes out a previously incomprehensible character, makes the role more meaningful within Brando's body of work, and unveils sociopolitical depths beneath the film's superficial mythology—all because Kurtz was at last fully revealed to the audience. The new scene hints briefly at an aesthetic reversal of Capote's then-and-now moment: the last great Method actor, for years shrouded in bloated eccentricity and financial self-destructiveness, suddenly revealed in a moment of artistic clarity.

“Bloated eccentricity and financial self-destructiveness” is also an apt description of the press's reaction to *Apocalypse Now*. While Coppola's film shared the Palme d'Or at Cannes, garnered several Oscar nominations, and managed to recoup its investment costs, for many its enormous overruns exemplified an industry in crisis (along with the other high-prestige debacle of the day, Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* [1980]). In fact, the crisis was years earlier, and Hollywood had already begun to radically change in response to it. Following the industry recession of 1969–1971, the studios took major steps to insure renewed stability and amortize the risk inherent in film-making. Diversified investments such as Disney and Universal theme parks, Columbia Records, and the MGM Grand hotel and casino mitigated possible losses. Conglomeration resulted in, among other deals, Paramount's purchase by Gulf & Western and Transamerica's buyout of United Artists. Outside investors, tax-shelter financing, and advanced sales to ancillary markets enabled studios to finance pictures using little of their own money.⁸ Lastly, according to Justin Wyatt, the “high concept” blockbuster mentality—famously described by Steven Spielberg as movie ideas “that you can hold in your hand”—encouraged production of uncomplicated films with broad appeal and franchise possibilities, *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) being the leading early examples.

Perhaps one of the most neglected facets of this increasingly risk-averse business strategy, especially where actors are concerned, is the expanded role of cast insurance in the New Hollywood. Elizabeth O. Hubbard describes the extent to which insurance providers now exert control over production choices and artistic decisions, including casting:

Bond companies have been known to send representatives to sit on a set and observe filming, monitor risks, and make recommendations. . . . A stunt planned with a helicopter might be changed to an airplane if the representative suggests it. In addition, it is not unheard of for completion bond companies to recommend to the producer that a key player or director be replaced. . . . To the audience, the idea of an underwriter having final script approval may be shocking. (sec. 1; all subsequent legal references are to Hubbard)⁹

Hardly a new phenomenon, cast insurance is at least as old as Douglas Fairbanks's “scarred face” policy (n17), and since the 1930s it has been economically vital for Hollywood's elaborate and therefore risk-laden productions. However, contemporary insurance companies have become considerably more invasive regarding actors' health and conduct. Providers regularly request physicals administered by a company-endorsed physician. Older actors have sometimes been denied roles due to “unacceptable” health risks: for example, Ray Milland saw his part in *Trading Places* (1983) given to Don Ameche after the insurance company deemed Milland's health inadequate. As was required of James Dean, dangerous offscreen pursuits such as race-car driving must be curtailed for the duration of filming, as in the cases of Paul Newman and Tom Cruise (1D).

Beyond these documented health problems and openly risky hobbies, an actor's general behavior and private habits have become more closely scrutinized. Cases such as that of Elliott Gould, who after his (possibly drug-provoked) outbursts on the set of the never-released *A Glimpse of Tiger* (1971) was effectively black-

listed for two years by insurers (1D), have led to insurers' greater reliance on "moral hazard" clauses. Defined as "a characteristic of the insured that increases the probability of loss to the insurer," moral hazard can be invoked by an insurer who believes that the insured or his employers have failed to disclose unsafe behavior that may be well-known or rumored within the Hollywood community, but which would not be revealed in a standard physical exam—anorexia, binge eating, or drug and alcohol use, for example (2C). One famous case involved the 1994 lawsuit by River Phoenix's insurer, after his very public death from a drug overdose on the sidewalk outside L.A.'s notorious Viper Room forced the insurer to pay out \$5.5 million to the producers of the nearly completed Phoenix film *Dark Blood*. In an unprecedented move for a Hollywood insurer, a claim was filed against Phoenix's estate. The insurers argued that Phoenix, a gifted young actor frequently compared to James Dean, breached contract when he didn't admit to drug use on the medical certificate, and that his estate was liable for the insurance payment (2). Prior to this legal action, actors "were insulated from the insurers' remedies" (2D); in the wake of the River Phoenix incident, calls for drug testing of actors grew louder and the Screen Actors Guild expressed concern over such "outrageous demands" (qtd. in introduction).

Near the close of her article, Hubbart (an attorney writing for an insurance law journal) adds her voice to that call, saying that as "responsible members of their profession," and for the economic betterment of the industry, actors should accede to drug testing. The dilemma Hollywood faces, however, is revealed in that word "responsible." As an industry associated with and profiting from the thrill of rebellion, however vicarious, Hollywood still craves the spirit of danger if not the fact of it; after all, one of the highest of high concept blockbusters in the 1980s, *Top Gun* (1986), featured a protagonist code-named "Maverick." Though from a publicity perspective the first generation of Method stars had generated enormous attention, they had also proved

personally self-destructive and artistically and financially undependable. A new acting movement was needed that would renew the reality effect attributed to the Method while curtailing the behavioral excesses stemming from the Method's countercultural connections.

Conclusion

Regardless of criticism of Robert De Niro by critics and other actors, the actorly transformation he popularized prompted a new attitude toward physical discipline and role preparation that complicated extra-filmic forms of rebelliousness. Method concepts (however far from actual practice) such as "being in the moment" and "becoming the part" were rarely more resonant than with De Niro. Michael Moriarty, De Niro's costar in *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1973), reports that when he visited the set of *Taxi Driver* (1976) he declined an introduction, saying, "Don't bother. I don't know that guy at all. I knew Bruce Pearson [De Niro's character in *Bang the Drum*]. I don't know Travis Bickle or Bobby De Niro" (qtd. in Baxter 101). According to Meryl Streep, who worked with De Niro in *Stanley and Iris* (1990), "if you go deep into a character Jack Nicholson is playing, sooner or later Jack will pop out. But no matter how deep you go into a character Bobby is playing, it will be that character all the way through. He's really pure. He just 'loves' acting. He's a pure actor acting" (qtd. in Tomlinson 535). A story told by Shelley Winters about the filming of Roger Corman's *Bloody Mama* (1970) completes the picture:

Toward the end of the film when he OD's and the Barker family must bury him hurriedly, Bobby insisted on getting into the grave so the camera could record the dirt covering his face. In the scene I was hysterical with grief, and I didn't realize until he was almost completely covered that it was Bobby and not a dummy in this grave. I immediately stopped the scene and pulled him out, saying, "For Christ's sake, Bobby! Even Marlon [Brando] has never pulled such a dangerous stupid

trick in a movie. This is not real life, it's only a film."

His soft answer has puzzled me for years. "But Shelley, for actors, aren't the movies our only real life?" (qtd. in Tomlinson 595)

For these actors, a "professional" encounter with De Niro suggests the impossibility of a "personal" encounter. To be "in the moment," for him at least, requires intense concentration and reserve at all moments. Any "dangerous stupid tricks"—being buried alive, say, or gaining sixty pounds, or any of the other dedicated physical tasks performed by De Niro's successors—must serve the film production, not upset it.

NOTES

1. See Blake; for one of the very few academic treatments of Chaney, see Studlar.

2. See, for example, Tasker; Jeffords.

3. As if Olivier had asked him the question instead, Robert De Niro says in an interview, "I just can't fake acting. I know movies are an illusion, and maybe the first rule is to fake it—but not for me. I'm too curious. I want the experience. I want to deal with all the facts of a character, thin or fat" (Watters 94).

4. A complete list of winners and nominees includes Robert De Niro, Best Actor 1980 (*Raging Bull*); Ben Kingsley, BA 1982 (*Gandhi*); Jessica Lange, nominated BA 1982 (*Frances*); Kim Stanley, nominated Best Supporting Actress 1982 (*Frances*); Jack Nicholson, nominated BA 1985 (*Prizzi's Honor*); Daniel Day-Lewis, BA 1989 (*My Left Foot*); Robert De Niro, nominated BA 1991 (*Cape Fear*); Daniel Day-Lewis, nominated BA 1993 (*In the Name of the Father*); Tom Hanks, BA 1993 (*Philadelphia*); Ralph Fiennes, nominated BSA 1993 (*Schindler's List*); Nicolas Cage, BA 1995 (*Leaving Las Vegas*); Meryl Streep, nominated BA 1998 (*One True Thing*); Edward Norton, nominated BA 1998 (*American History X*); Russell Crowe, nominated BA 1999 (*The Insider*); Hilary Swank, BA 1999 (*Boys Don't Cry*); Tom Hanks, nominated BA 2000 (*Cast Away*); Ed Harris, nominated BA 2000 (*Pollock*); Ellen Burstyn, nominated BA 2000 (*Requiem for a Dream*); Will Smith, nominated BA 2001 (*Ali*); Renée Zellweger, nominated BA 2001 (*Bridget Jones's Diary*); Adrien Brody, BA 2002 (*The Pianist*); Nicolas Cage, nominated BA 2002 (*Adaptation*); Charlize Theron, BA 2003 (*Monster*); Renée Zellweger, BSA 2003 (*Cold Mountain*); Jamie Foxx, BA 2004 (*Ray*); Hilary Swank, BA 2004 (*Million Dollar Baby*); George Clooney, BSA 2005 (*Syriana*).

5. From the first epigraph in Baty: "When she first came to me I was amazed at the startling sensitivity which she possessed and which had remained fresh and undimmed, struggling to express itself despite the life to which she had been subjected."

6. See Mendelsohn.

7. The Oscar incident—wherein Brando sent to decline the award a woman calling herself Sacheen Littlefeather, who described the rejection as a response to American mistreatment and misrepresentation of American Indians—apparently incited Molly Haskell to write a nine-installment consideration of Brando's career in the *Village Voice*. In the first part she links the event to his improvisational Method genius, "his show-stopping theatrical instinct—operable on Academy night by remote control." "Just as he illuminated so many bad pictures over the years—some of them as execrable as any Academy production—so he strikes sparks in an otherwise hopeless evening" (76).

8. For an excellent overview of these changes, see Cook chapters seven and eight.

9. The example of switching from a helicopter to an airplane is a veiled reference to an infamous accident on the set of *The Twilight Zone: The Movie* (1983), when actor/director Vic Morrow and two child actors were decapitated by helicopter blades—an incident that led to far greater scrutiny of cast safety by the insurance industry (Hubbart n78).

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