PART ONE

ONTOLOGY OF THE FILM ACTOR

Introduction

Almost as soon as cinema began, and certainly as soon as staged or fictional events were filmed, critics and theorists began to question the ontological status of film acting. Initially, film acting had to be differentiated from stage acting. As I discussed in the General Introduction, early film theorists grappled with the status of film acting not just from within the context of silent cinema but continuing into the sound era, when the nature of film acting, now supplemented with dialogue, altered again. Interestingly, however, as sound became dominant and film acting would seem to have stabilized, theorists in the classical sound era and beyond have still sought to appraise the elemental qualities of film acting. The essays in this section each attempt to define fundamental features of film acting, approaching the subject from three distinct viewpoints.

Siegfried Kracauer's "Remarks on the Actor" is excerpted from his broad *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, which was first published in 1960 but was written over roughly a twenty-year period in both Marseilles and the United States, after Kracauer fled Germany. In his *Theory of Film*, Kracauer argues that, as an extension of photography, the essence of cinema lies in its ability to record and reveal reality. In particular, as Miriam Hansen points out, he views cinema as both an expression of and medium for modernity, especially in its ability to stage encounters with contingency and chance (Hansen 1997). Kracauer's views on acting thus engage questions of realism and material aesthetics, unlike Münsterberg and Balàzs, each of whom privilege film's ability to distort rather than record reality.

Kracauer argues that the stage actor and the film actor differ in two key ways: first, in terms of the "qualities they must posses to meet the demands of their media," and, second, in terms of "the functions they must assume" in their respective media. Under the rubric of "qualities," Kracauer claims that the film actor differs from the stage actor in his "emphasis on being," by which he means that the film actor must act as if he is not acting, but just exists as his character. Also, in line with his emphasis on the element of contingency and chance in realism, Kracauer argues that film actors, unlike their theater counterparts, should appear casual, "fortuitous," and on the "fringe of indeterminacy," rather than seeming deliberate or purposeful. Additionally, Kracauer suggests, in terms similar to the Soviets, that unlike the stage actor, who can resort to more extreme costume and make-up, the film actor will be dependent upon his physique, and his "real" appearance will be symptomatic of his character.

As for "function," Kracauer argues that theatrical plays revolve around character almost exclusively, whereas films are not exclusively human, but place the actor in the context of other props, landscapes, and images, so that he stands as an "object among objects." Nonetheless, while seeming to reproduce earlier arguments about the actor as mere effect of editing, Kracauer attributes different functions to different kinds of actors. He links the use of non-actors in film to the recording function of cinema, and suggests that they lend a documentary touch to narrative films. Rather than functioning as individuals, the non-actor represents a whole group of people, such as a class or segment of society. While both the star and the non-actor function as types defined by their physical appearance, Kracauer claims that the star stands out as an individual, not a member of a large category of people. He contrasts both types with the professional actor who requires training in order to sustain characterization, and can disappear into a role.

Stanley Cavell's comments on acting in the two brief excerpts here touch upon similar themes but diverge from Kracauer in a few key ways. Approaching the subject of acting from a literary philosophical background, Cavell, like Kracauer, links his discussion of types to his ideas about the necessities of the film medium. Like Kracauer, Cavell claims that humans are not "ontologically favored" in photographs and thus we always view the actor in relation to a world of objects. In addition, Cavell emphasizes projection as an essential difference between stage and screen that assures the absence of both the performer and the audience. Cavell admits that someone is present in a film, if only via a photographic relay. But, whereas the character dominates the stage performance, and allows the spectator to be absorbed into the role, the actor in film "takes the role onto himself" and dominates the film. Thus, Cavell suggests that all screen actors create types. Rather than merely importing types from other art forms, such as melodrama or folklore, Cavell says that film created new types, combinations of types, and/or modifications of types. Whereas Kracauer differentiates between the non-actor and the star as type, Cavell differentiates between stereotypes, which would be linked to large categories of people, and the actor as individual type: "For what makes someone a type is not his similarity with other members of that type but his striking separateness from other people." The screen actor, then, including character actors as well as stars, represents actor, character, and individual at once.

Like Kracauer and Cavell, John O. Thompson considers features of screen acting related to type. But rather than compare stage and screen, Thompson applies the semiotic technique of commutation to the analysis of screen acting in order to denaturalize the assumed fit between actor and role that both Kracauer and Cavell describe, and to open a potential space for ideological critique. Commutation in linguistics makes a substitution between words or phonemes to determine whether the substitution at the level of signifier makes a correlative change in the signified. In applying this to actors—substituting Shirley Temple for Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, for instance, or switching the roles of Jimmy Stewart and John Wayne in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*—Thompson aims to consider not merely *if* a difference results, but *which* difference. He considers film performance as a bundle of distinctive features, each potentially distinguishing, that include the particularities of individual performances, such as a character's smile or gait, as well as the actor's physical type and general persona. Thompson acknowledges a hierarchy in film among stars, character actors, extras, chorus girls, and stuntmen—a pecking order reflected in how commutable the individual person is in a role—but, with his emphasis on aspects of performance, he opens up ways of talking about the lower orders of actors and even non-actors, as well as stars.

Since the publication of these essays, the ontological status of film acting has undergone further changes. Future theorists may wish to consider whether and how changing technologies have again altered the nature of film acting; or the difference between film and television acting; or the ways in which stage acting has become more cinematic as theater has progressively adopted more multimedia technologies; and how actors from stage and screen—both film and TV—become less distinguishable from one another as they increasingly cross over from one medium to the other.

1 Remarks on the Actor

SIEGFRIED KRACAUER

The film actor occupies a unique position at the junction of staged and unstaged life. That he differs considerably from the stage actor was already recognized in the primitive days when Réjane and Sarah Bernhardt played theater before the camera; the camera let them down pitilessly. What was wrong with their acting, the very acting which all theatergoers raved about?

Stage actor and screen actor differ from each other in two ways. The first difference concerns the qualities they must possess to meet the demands of their media. The second difference bears on the functions they must assume in theatrical plays and film narratives respectively.

Qualities

How can the stage actor's contribution to his role be defined in terms of the cinema? To be sure, like the film actor, he must draw on his nature in the widest sense of the word to render the character he is supposed to represent; and since his projective powers are rarely unlimited, a measure of type-casting is indispensable for the stage also. But here the similarities end. Due to the conditions of the theater, the stage actor is not in a position directly to convey to the audience the many, often imperceptible details that make up the physical side of his impersonation; these details cannot cross the unbridgeable distance between stage and spectator. The physical existence of the stage performer is incommunicable. Hence the necessity for the stage actor to evoke in the audience a mental image of his character. This he achieves by means of the theatrical devices at his disposal—a fitting make-up, appropriate gestures and voice inflections, etc.

Significantly, when film critics compare the screen actor with the stage actor they usually speak of the latter's exaggerations, overstatements, amplifications.[1] In fact, his mask is as "unnatural" as his behavior, for otherwise he would not be able to create the illusion of naturalness. Instead of drawing a true-to-life portrait which would be ineffective on the stage, he works with suggestions calculated to make the spectators believe that they are in the presence of his character. Under the impact of these suggestions they visualize what is actually not given them. Of course, the play itself supports the actor's conjurer efforts. The situations

in which he appears and the verbal references to his motives and fears and desires help the audience to complement his own definitions so that the image he projects gains in scope and depth. Thus he may attain a magic semblance of life. Yet life itself, this flow of subtle modes of being, eludes the stage. Is it even aspired to in genuine theater?

Emphasis on being

Leonard Lyons reports the following studio incident in his newspaper column: Fredric March, the well-known screen and stage actor, was making a movie scene and the director interrupted him. "Sorry, I did it again," the star apologized. "I keep forgetting—this is a movie and I mustn't act."[2]

If this is not the whole truth about film acting it is at least an essential part of it. Whenever old films are shown at the New York Museum of Modern Art, the spectators invariably feel exhilarated over expressions and poses which strike them as being theatrical. Their laughter indicates that they expect film characters to behave in a natural way. Audience sensibilities have long since been conditioned to the motion picture camera's preference for nature in the raw. And since the regular use of close-ups invites the spectator to look for minute changes of a character's appearance and bearing, the actor is all the more obliged to relinquish those "unnatural" surplus movements and stylizations he would need on the stage to externalize his impersonation. "The slightest exaggeration of gesture and manner of speaking," says René Clair, "is captured by the merciless mechanism and amplified by the projection of the film."[3] What the actor tries to impart—the physical existence of a character—is overwhelmingly present on the screen. The camera really isolates a fleeting glance, an inadvertent shrug of the shoulder. This accounts for Hitchcock's insistence on "negative acting, the ability to express words by doing nothing."[4] "I mustn't act," as Fredric March put it. To be more precise, the film actor must act as if he did not act at all but were a real-life person caught in the act by the camera. He must seem to *be* his character.[5] He is in a sense a photographer's model.

Casualness

This implies something infinitely subtle. Any genuinely photographic portrait tends to sustain the impression of unstaged reality; and much as it concentrates on the typical features of a face, these features still affect us as being elicited from spontaneous self-revelations. There is, and should be, something fragmentary and fortuitous about photographic portraits. Accordingly, the film actor must seem to be his character in such a way that all his expressions, gestures, and poses point beyond themselves to the diffuse contexts out of which they arise. They must breathe a certain casualness marking them as fragments of an inexhaustible texture.

Many a great film maker has been aware that this texture reaches into the deep layers of the mind. René Clair observes that with screen actors spontaneity counts all the more, since they have to atomize their role in the process of acting;[6] and Pudovkin says that, when working with them, he "looked for those small details and shades of expression which . . . reflect the inner psychology of man."[7] Both value projections of the unconscious. What they want to get at, Hanns Sachs, a film-minded disciple of Freud's, spells out in psychoanalytical terms: he

requests the film actor to advance the narrative by embodying "such psychic events as are before or beyond speech . . . above all those . . . unnoticed ineptitudes of behavior described by Freud as symptomatic actions."[8]

The film actor's performance, then, is true to the medium only if it does not assume the airs of a self-sufficient achievement but impresses us as an incident—one of many possible incidents—of his character's unstaged material existence. Only then is the life he renders truly cinematic. When movie critics sometimes blame an actor for overacting his part, they do not necessarily mean that he acts theatrically; rather, they wish to express the feeling that his acting is, somehow, too purposeful, that it lacks that fringe of indeterminacy or indefiniteness which is characteristic of photography.

Physique

For this reason the film actor is less independent of his physique than the stage actor, whose face never fills the whole field of vision. The camera not only bares theatrical make-up but reveals the delicate interplay between physical and psychological traits, outer movements and inner changes. Since most of these correspondences materialize unconsciously, it is very difficult for the actor to stage them to the satisfaction of an audience which, being in a position to check all pertinent visual data, is wary of anything that interferes with a character's naturalness. Eisenstein's 1939 claim that film actors should exert "self-control . . . to the millimeter of movement"[9] sounds chimerical; it testifies to his ever-increasing and rather uncinematic concern for art in the traditional sense, art which completely consumes the given raw material. Possessed with formative aspirations, he forgot that even the most arduous "self-control" cannot produce the effect of involuntary reflex actions. Hence the common recourse to actors whose physical appearance, as it presents itself on the screen, fits into the plot—whereby it is understood that their appearance is in a measure symptomatic of their nature, their whole way of being. "I choose actors exclusively for their physique," declares Rossellini.[10] His dictum makes it quite clear that, because of their indebtedness to photography, film productions depend much more than theatrical productions on casting according to physical aspects.

Functions

From the viewpoint of cinema the functions of the stage actor are determined by the fact that the theater exhausts itself in representing inter-human relations. The action of the stage play flows through its characters; what they are saying and doing makes up the content of the play—in fact, it is the play itself. Stage characters are the carriers of all the meanings a theatrical plot involves. This is confirmed by the world about them: even realistic settings must be adjusted to stage conditions and, hence, are limited in their illusionary power. It may be doubted whether they are intended at all to evoke reality as something imbued with meanings of its own. As a rule, the theater acknowledges the need for stylization.*

* In his *Stage to Screen*, Vardac submits that the realistic excesses of the nineteenth-century theater anticipated the cinema. To the extent that the theater then tried to defy stage conditions, he argues, it was already pregnant with the new, still unborn medium.

Realistic or not, stage settings are primarily designed to bear out the characters and their interplay; the idea behind them is not to achieve full authenticity—unattainable anyway on the stage—but to echo and enhance the human entanglements conveyed to us by acting and dialogue. Stage imagery serves as a foil for stage acting. Man is indeed the absolute measure of this universe, which hinges on him. And he is its smallest unit. Each character represents an insoluble entity on the stage; you cannot watch his face or his hands without relating them to his whole appearance, physically and psychologically.

Object among objects

The cinema in this sense is not exclusively human. Its subject matter is the infinite flux of visible phenomena—those ever-changing patterns of physical existence whose flow may include human manifestations but need not climax in them.

In consequence, the film actor is not necessarily the hub of the narrative, the carrier of all its meanings. Cinematic action is always likely to pass through regions which, should they contain human beings at all, yet involve them only in an accessory, unspecified way. Many a film summons the weird presence of furniture in an abandoned apartment; when you then see or hear someone enter, it is for a transient moment the sensation of human interference in general that strikes you most. In such cases the actor represents the species rather than a well-defined individual. Nor is the whole of his being any longer sacrosanct. Parts of his body may fuse with parts of his environment into a significant configuration which suddenly stands out among the passing images of physical life. Who would not remember shots picturing an ensemble of neon lights, lingering shadows, and some human face?

This decomposition of the actor's wholeness corresponds to the piecemeal manner in which he supplies the elements from which eventually his role is built. "The film actor," says Pudovkin, "is deprived of a consciousness of the uninterrupted development of the action in his work. The organic connection between the consecutive parts of his work, as a result of which the distinct whole image is created, is not for him. The whole image of the actor is only to be conceived as a future appearance on the screen, subsequent to the editing of the director."[11]

"I mustn't act"—Fredric March is right in a sense he himself may not have envisaged. Screen actors are raw material;[12] and they are often made to appear within contexts discounting them as personalities, as actors. Whenever they are utilized this way, utter restraint is their main virtue. Objects among objects, they must not even exhibit their nature but, as Barjavel remarks, "remain, as much as possible, below the natural."[13]

Types

The non-actor

Considering the significance of the screen character's unstaged nature and his function as raw material, it is understandable that many film makers have felt tempted to rely on non-actors for their narrative. Flaherty calls children and animals the finest of all film material

because of their spontaneous actions.[14] And Epstein says: "No set, no costume can have the aspect, the cast of truth. No professional faking can produce the admirable technical gestures of a topman or a fisherman. A smile of kindness, a cry of rage are as difficult to imitate as a rainbow in the sky or the turbulent ocean."[15] Eager for genuine smiles and cries, G. W. Pabst created them artificially when shooting a carousal of anti-Bolshevist soldiery for his silent film, *The Love of Jeanne Ney*: he herded together a hundred-odd Russian ex-officers, provided them with vodka and women, and then photographed the ensuing orgy.[16]

There are periods in which non-actors seem to be the last word of a national cinema. The Russians cultivated them in their revolutionary era, and so did the Italians after their escape from Fascist domination. Tracing the origins of Italian neorealism to the immediate postwar period, Chiaromonte observes: "Movie directors lived in the streets and on the roads then, like everybody else. They saw what everybody else saw. They had no studios and big installations with which to fake what they had seen, and they had little money. Hence they had to improvise, using real streets for their exteriors, and real people in the way of stars."[17] When history is made in the streets, the streets tend to move onto the screen.* For all their differences in ideology and technique, *Potemkin* and *Paisan* have this "street" quality in common; they feature environmental situations rather than private affairs, episodes involving society at large rather than stories centering upon an individual conflict. In other words, they show a tendency toward documentary.

Practically all story films availing themselves of non-actors follow this pattern. Without exception they have a documentary touch. Think of such story films as *The Quiet One*, *Los Olvidados*, or the De Sica films, *The Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D.*: in all of them the emphasis is on the world about us; their protagonists are not so much particular individuals as types representative of whole groups of people. These narratives serve to dramatize social conditions in general. The preference for real people on the screen and the documentary approach seem to be closely interrelated.

The reason is this: it is precisely the task of portraying wide areas of actual reality, social or otherwise, which calls for "typage"—the recourse to people who are part and parcel of that reality and can be considered typical of it. As Rotha puts it: "'Typage' . . . represents the least artificial organisation of reality."[18] It is not accidental that film directors devoted to the rendering of larger segments of actual life are inclined to condemn the professional actor for "faking." Like Epstein, who turns against "professional faking," Rossellini is said to believe that actors "fake emotions."[19] This predilection for non-actors goes hand in hand with a vital interest in social patterns rather than individual destinies. Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* highlights the incredible callousness of despondent juveniles; the great De Sica films focus on the plight of the unemployed and the misery of old age insufficiently provided for. Non-actors are chosen because of their authentic looks and behavior. Their major virtue is to figure in a narrative which explores the reality they help constitute but does not culminate in their lives themselves.

* A notable exception was the German cinema after World War I: it shunned outer reality, withdrawing into a shell. See Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, pp. 58–60.

The Hollywood star

In institutionalizing stars, Hollywood has found a way of tapping natural attractiveness as if it were oil. Aside from economic expediency, though, the star system may well cater to inner needs common to many people in this country. This system provides variegated models of conduct, thus helping, however obliquely, pattern human relationships in a culture not yet old enough to have peopled its firmament with stars that offer comfort or threaten the trespasser—stars not to be mistaken for Hollywood's.

The typical Hollywood star resembles the non-actor in that he acts out a standing character identical with his own or at least developed from it, frequently with the aid of make-up and publicity experts. As with any real-life figure on the screen, his presence in a film points beyond the film. He affects the audience not just because of his fitness for this or that role but for being, or seeming to be, a particular kind of person—a person who exists independently of any part he enacts in a universe outside the cinema which the audience believes to be reality or wishfully substitutes for it. The Hollywood star imposes the screen image of his physique, the real or a stylized one, and all that this physique implies and connotes on every role he creates. And he uses his acting talent, if any, exclusively to feature the individual he is or appears to be, no matter for the rest whether his self-portrayal exhausts itself in a few stereotyped characteristics or brings out various potentialities of his underlying nature. The late Humphrey Bogart invariably drew on Humphrey Bogart whether he impersonated a sailor, a private "eye," or a night club owner.

But why is any one chosen for stardom while others are not? Evidently, something about the gait of the star, the form of his face, his manner of reacting and speaking, ingratiates itself so deeply with the masses of moviegoers that they want to see him again and again, often for a considerable stretch of time. It is logical that the roles of a star should be made to order. The spell he casts over the audience cannot be explained unless one assumes that his screen appearance satisfies widespread desires of the moment—desires connected, somehow, with the patterns of living he represents or suggests.

The professional actor

Discussing the uses of professional actors and non-actors, Mr. Bernard Miles, himself an English actor, declares that the latter prove satisfactory only in documentary films. In them, says he, "non-actors achieve all, or at any rate most, that the very best professional actors could achieve in the same circumstances. But this is only because most of these pictures avoid the implications of human action, or, where they do present it, present it in such a fragmentary way as never to put to the test the training and natural qualities which differentiate an actor from a non-actor." Documentary, he concludes, "has never faced up to the problem of sustained characterization."[20]

Be this as it may, the majority of feature films does raise this problem. And challenged to help solve it, the non-actor is likely to forfeit his naturalness. He becomes paralyzed before the camera, as Rossellini observes;[21] and the task of restoring him to his true nature is often impossible to fulfill. There are exceptions, of course. In both his *Bicycle Thief* and *Umberto D.*, Vittorio De Sica—of whom they say in Italy that he "could lure even a sack of potatoes into acting"[22]—succeeds in making people who never acted before portray coherent human beings. Old Umberto D., a rounded-out character with a wide range of emotions and reactions, is all the more memorable since his whole past seems to come alive in his intensely touching presence. But one should keep in mind that the Italians are blessed with mimetic gifts and have a knack of expressive gestures. Incidentally, while producing *The Men*, a film about paraplegic veterans, director Fred Zinnemann found that people who have undergone a powerful emotional experience are particularly fit to re-enact themselves.[23]

As a rule, however, sustained characterization calls for professional actors. Indeed many stars are. Paradoxically enough, the over-strained non-actor tends to behave like a bad actor, whereas an actor who capitalizes on his given being may manage to appear as a candid non-actor, thus achieving a second state of innocence. He is both the player and the instrument; and the quality of this instrument—his natural self as it has grown in real life—counts as much as his talent in playing it. Think of Raimu. Aware that the screen actor depends upon the non-actor in him, a discerning film critic once said of James Cagney that he "can coax or shove a director until a scene from a dreamy script becomes a scene from life as Cagney remembered it."[24]

Only few actors are able to metamorphose their own nature, including those incidental fluctuations which are the essence of cinematic life. Here Paul Muni comes to mind—not to forget Lon Chaney and Walter Huston. When watching Charles Laughton or Werner Krauss in different roles, one gets the feeling that they even change their height along with their parts. Instead of appearing as they are on the screen, such protean actors actually disappear in screen characters who seem to have no common denominator.

Notes

1 See, for instance, Lindgren, *The Art of the Film*, pp. 156–7; Barbaro, "Le cinéma sans acteurs," in *Le Rôle intellectuel du cinéma*, p. 227; Barjavel, *Cinéma total . . .*, p. 81.
2 Quoted by Lyons, "The Lyons Den," *New York Post*, June 5, 1950.
3 Clair, *Réflexion faite*, p. 187.
4 "Film Crasher Hitchcock," *Cue*, May 19, 1951.
5 Cf. Barjavel, op. cit. pp. 84–5.
6 Clair, op. cit. p. 187.
7 Quoted by Rotha, *Documentary Film*, p. 143, from Pudovkin, "Acting—The Cinema *v.* the Theatre," *The Criterion*, vol. VIII, no. 1.
8 Sachs, "Film Psychology," *Close Up*, Nov. 1928, vol. III, no. 5:9.
9 Eisenstein, *Film Form*, p. 192.
10 Rossellini, "Dix ans de cinéma (I)," *Cahiers du cinéma*, Aug.–Sept. 1955, vol. IX, no. 50:9. See also Balàzs, *Der sichtbare Mensch*, pp. 55–6.
11 Pudovkin, *Film Technique and Film Acting*, part I, p. 109.
12 Cf. Cooke, *Douglas Fairbanks*, p. 6.
13 Barjavel, *Cinéma total . . .*, p. 81.
14 Cited by Rotha, *Documentary Film*, p. 149. See also Rotha, *The Film Till Now*, p. 363.
15 Quoted by Marie Epstein, "Biographical Notes," in Bachmann, ed., *Jean Epstein, 1897–1953*; *Cinemages*, no. 2:8.
16 See Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, p. 175.
17 Chiaromonte, "Rome Letter: Italian Movies," *Partisan Review*, June 1944, vol. XVI, no. 6:628.
18 Rotha, *Documentary Film*, p. 148. See also Nicholl, *Film and Theatre*, p. 172.

19 Reynolds, *Leave It to the People*, p. 147.
20 Miles, "Are Actors Necessary?" *Documentary News Letter*, April 1941, vol. 2, no. 4:71.
21 Rossellini, "Dix ans de cinéma (I)," *Cahiers du cinéma*, Aug.–Sept. 1955, vol. IX, no. 50:9.
22 Chiaromonte, op. cit. p. 623.
23 Zinnemann, "On Using Non-Actors in Pictures," *The New York Times*, Jan. 8, 1950.
24 Ferguson, "Life Goes to the Pictures," *films*, Spring 1940, vol. 1, no. 2:22.

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2 Reflections on the Ontology of Film

STANLEY CAVELL

Audience, actor, and star

The depth of the automatism of photography is to be read not alone in its mechanical production of an image of reality, but in its mechanical defeat of our presence to that reality. The audience in a theater can be defined as those to whom the actors are present while they are not present to the actors.[1] But movies allow the audience to be mechanically absent. The fact that I am invisible and inaudible to the actors, and fixed in position, no longer needs accounting for; it is not part of a convention I have to comply with; the proceedings do not have to make good the fact that I do nothing in the face of tragedy, or that I laugh at the follies of others. In viewing a movie my helplessness is mechanically assured: I am present not at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb (like a memory). In this, movies resemble novels, a fact mirrored in the sound of narration itself, whose tense is the past.

It might be said: "But surely there is the obvious difference between a movie house and a theater that is not recorded by what has so far been said and that outweighs all this fiddle of differences. The obvious difference is that in a theater we are in the presence of an actor, in a movie house we are not. You have said that in both places the actor is in our presence and in neither are we in his, the difference lying in the mode of our absence. But there is also the plain fact that in a theater a real man is *there*, and in a movie no real man is there. That is obviously essential to the differences between our responses to a play and to a film." What that means must not be denied; but the fact remains to be understood. Bazin meets it head on by simply denying that "the screen is incapable of putting us 'in the presence of' the actor"; it, so to speak, relays his presence to us, as by mirrors.[2] Bazin's idea here really fits the facts of live television, in which the thing we are presented with is happening simultaneously with its presentation. But in live television, what is present to us while it is happening is not the world, but an event standing out from the world. Its point is not to reveal, but to cover (as with a gun), to keep something on view.

It is an incontestable fact that in a motion picture no live human being is up there. But a human *something* is, and something unlike anything else we know. We can stick to our plain description of that human something as "in our presence while we are not in his" (present *at* him, because looking at him, but not present *to* him) and still account for the difference

between his live presence and his photographed presence to us. We need to consider what is present or, rather, since the topic is the human being, *who* is present.

One's first impulse may be to say that in a play the character is present, whereas in a film the actor is. That sounds phony or false: one wants to say that both are present in both. But there is more to it, ontologically more. Here I think of a fine passage of Panofsky's:

> Othello or Nora are definite, substantial figures created by the playwright. They can be played well or badly, and they can be "interpreted" in one way or another; but they most definitely exist, no matter who plays them or even whether they are played at all. The character in a film, however, lives and dies with the actor. It is not the entity "Othello" interpreted by Robeson or the entity "Nora" interpreted by Duse, it is the entity "Greta Garbo" incarnate in a figure called Anna Christie or the entity "Robert Montgomery" incarnate in a murderer who, for all we know or care to know, may forever remain anonymous but will never cease to haunt our memories.[3]

If the character lives and dies with the actor, that ought to mean that the actor lives and dies with the character. I think that is correct, but it needs clarification. Let us develop it slightly.

For the stage, an actor works himself into a role; for the screen, a performer takes the role onto himself. The stage actor explores his potentialities and the possibilities of his role simultaneously; in performance these meet at a point in spiritual space—the better the performance, the deeper the point. In this respect, a role in a play is like a position in a game, say, third base: various people can play it, but the great third baseman is a man who has accepted and trained his skills and instincts most perfectly and matches them most intimately with his discoveries of the possibilities and necessities of third base. The screen performer explores his role like an attic and takes stock of his physical and temperamental endowment; he lends his being to the role and accepts only what fits; the rest is nonexistent. On the stage there are two beings, and the being of the character assaults the being of the actor; the actor survives only by yielding. A screen performance requires not so much training as planning. Of course, both the actor and the performer require, or can make use of, experience. The actor's role is his subject for study, and there is no end to it. But the screen performer is essentially not an actor at all: he *is* the subject of study, and a study not his own. (That is what the content of a photograph is—its subject.) On a screen the study is projected; on a stage the actor is the projector. An exemplary stage performance is one which, for a time, most fully creates a character. After Paul Scofield's performance in *King Lear*, we know who King Lear is, we have seen him in flesh. An exemplary screen performance is one in which, at a time, a star is born. After *The Maltese Falcon* we know a new star, only distantly a person. "Bogart" *means* "the figure created in a given set of films." His presence in those films is who he is, not merely in the sense in which a photograph of an event is that event; but in the sense that if those films did not exist, Bogart would not exist, the name "Bogart" would not mean what it does. The figure it names is not only in our presence, we are in his, in the only sense we could ever be. That is all the "presence" he has.

But it is complicated. A full development of all this would require us to place such facts as these: Humphrey Bogart was a man, and he appeared in movies both before and after the ones that created "Bogart." Some of them did not create a new star (say, the stable groom in *Dark Victory*), some of them defined stars—anyway meteors—that may be incompatible with Bogart (e.g., Duke Mantee and Fred C. Dobbs) but that are related to that figure and may

enter into our later experience of it. And Humphrey Bogart was both an accomplished actor and a vivid subject for a camera. Some people are, just as some people are both good pitchers and good hitters; but there are so few that it is surprising that the word "actor" keeps on being used in place of the more beautiful and more accurate word "star"; the stars are only to gaze at, after the fact, and their actions divine our projects. Finally, we must note the sense in which the creation of a (screen) performer is also the creation of a character—not the kind of character an author creates, but the kind that certain real people are: a type.

Types; cycles as genres

Around this point our attention turns from the physical medium of cinema in general to the specific forms or genres the medium has taken in the course of its history.

Both Panofsky and Bazin begin at the beginning, noting and approving that early movies adapt popular or folk arts and themes and performers and characters: farce, melodrama, circus, music hall, romance, etc. And both are gratifyingly contemptuous of intellectuals who could not come to terms with those facts of life. (Such intellectuals are the alter egos of the film promoters they so heartily despise. Roxy once advertised a movie as "Art, in every sense of the word"; his better half declaims, "This is not art, in any sense of the word.") Our question is, why did such forms and themes and characters lend themselves to film? Bazin, in what I have read of him, is silent on the subject, except to express gratitude to film for revivifying these ancient forms, and to justify in general the legitimacy of adaptation from one art to another. Arnold Hauser, if I understand him, suggests wrong answers, in a passage that includes the remark "Only a young art can be popular,"[4] a remark that not only is in itself baffling (did Verdi and Dickens and Chaplin and Frank Loesser work in young arts?) but suggests that it was only natural for the movies to pick up the forms they did. It *was* natural—anyway it happened fast enough—but not because movies were destined to popularity (they were at first no more popular than other forms of entertainment). In any case, popular arts are likely to pick up the forms and themes of high art for their material—popular theater naturally *burlesques*. And it means next to nothing to say that movies are young, because we do not know what the normal life span of an art is supposed to be, nor what would count as a unit of measure. Panofsky raises the question of the appropriateness of these original forms, but his answer is misleading.

> The legitimate paths of evolution [for the film] were opened, not by running away from the folk art character of the primitive film but by developing it within the limits of its own possibilities. Those primordial archetypes of film productions on the folk art level—success or retribution, sentiment, sensation, pornography, and crude humor—could blossom forth into genuine history, tragedy and romance, crime and adventure, and comedy, as soon as it was realized that they could be transfigured—not by an artificial injection of literary values but by the exploitation of the unique and specific possibilities of the new medium.[5]

The instinct here is sound, but the region is full of traps. What are "the unique and specific possibilities of the new medium"? Panofsky defines them as dynamization of space and spatialization of time—that is, in a movie things move, and you can be moved instantaneously

from anywhere to anywhere, and you can witness successively events happening at the same time. He speaks of these properties as "self-evident to the point of triviality" and, because of that, "easily forgotten or neglected." One hardly disputes this, or its importance. But we still do not understand what makes these properties "the possibilities of the medium." I am not now asking how one would know that these are *the* unique and specific possibilities (though I will soon get back to that); I am asking what it means to call them possibilities at all.

Why, for example, didn't the medium begin and remain in the condition of home movies, one shot just physically tacked on to another, cut and edited simply according to subject? (Newsreels essentially did, and they are nevertheless valuable, enough so to have justified the invention of moving pictures.) The answer seems obvious: narrative movies emerged because someone "saw the possibilities" of the medium—cutting and editing and taking shots at different distances from the subject. But again, these are mere actualities of film mechanics: every home movie and newsreel contains them. We could say: To make them "possibilities of the medium" is to realize what will give them *significance*—for example, the narrative and physical rhythms of melodrama, farce, American comedy of the 1930s. It is not as if film-makers saw these possibilities and then looked for something to apply them to. It is truer to say that someone with the wish to make a movie saw that certain established forms would give point to certain properties of film.

This perhaps sounds like quibbling, but what it means is that the aesthetic possibilities of a medium are not givens. You can no more tell what will give significance to the unique and specific aesthetic possibilities of projecting photographic images by thinking about them or seeing some, than you can tell what will give significance to the possibilities of paint by thinking about paint or by looking some over. You have to think about painting, and paintings; you have to think about motion pictures. What does this "thinking about them" consist in? Whatever the useful criticism of an art consists in. (Painters before Jackson Pollock had dripped paint, even deliberately. Pollock made dripping into a medium of painting.) I feel like saying: The first successful movies—i.e., the first moving pictures accepted as motion pictures—were not applications of a medium that was defined by given possibilities, but the *creation of a medium* by their giving significance to specific possibilities. Only the art itself can discover its possibilities, and the discovery of a new possibility is the discovery of a new medium. A medium is something through which or by means of which something specific gets done or said in particular ways. It provides, one might say, particular ways to get through to someone, to make sense; in art, they are forms, like forms of speech. To discover ways of making sense is always a matter of the relation of an artist to his art, each discovering the other.

Panofsky uncharacteristically skips a step when he describes the early silent films as an "unknown language . . . forced upon a public not yet capable of reading it."[6] His notion is (with good reason, writing when he did) of a few industrialists forcing their productions upon an addicted multitude. But from the beginning the language was not "unknown"; it was known to its creators, those who found themselves speaking it; and in the beginning there was no "public" in question; there were just some curious people. There soon was a public, but that just proves how easy the thing was to know. If we are to say that there was an "unknown" something, it was less like a language than like a fact—in particular, the fact that something is intelligible. So while it may be true, as Panofsky says, that "for a Saxon peasant of around 800 it was not easy to understand the meaning of a picture showing a man as he pours water over the head of another man," this has nothing special to do with the problems of a

moviegoer. The meaning of that act of pouring in certain communities is still not easy to understand; it was and is impossible to understand for anyone to whom the practice of baptism is unknown. Why did Panofsky suppose that comparable understanding is essential, or uniquely important, to the reading of movies? Apparently he needed an explanation for the persistence in movies of "fixed iconography"—"the well-remembered types of the Vamp and the Straight Girl . . . the Family Man, and the Villain," characters whose conduct was "predetermined accordingly"—an explanation for the persistence of an obviously primitive or folkloristic element in a rapidly developing medium. For he goes on, otherwise inexplicably, to say that "devices like these became gradually less necessary as the public grew accustomed to interpret the action by itself and were virtually abolished by the invention of the talking film." In fact such devices persist as long as there are still Westerns and gangster films and comedies and musicals and romances. *Which* specific iconography the Villain is given will alter with the times, but that his iconography remains specific (i.e., operates according to a "fixed attitude and attribute" principle)[7] seems undeniable: if Jack Palance in *Shane* is not a Villain, no honest home was ever in danger. Films have changed, but that is not because we don't need such explanations any longer; it is because we can't *accept* them.

These facts are accounted for by the actualities of the film medium itself: types are exactly what carry the forms movies have relied upon. These media created new types, or combinations and ironic reversals of types; but there they were, and stayed. Does this mean that movies can never create individuals, only types? What it means is that this is the movies' way of creating individuals: they create *individualities*. For what makes someone a type is not his similarity with other members of that type but his striking separateness from other people.

Until recently, types of black human beings were not created in film: black people were stereotypes—mammies, shiftless servants, loyal retainers, entertainers. We were not given, and were not in a position to be given, individualities that projected particular *ways* of inhabiting a social role; we recognized only the role. Occasionally the humanity behind the role would manifest itself and the result was a revelation not of a human individuality, but of an entire realm of humanity becoming visible. When in *Gone With the Wind* Vivien Leigh, having counted on Butterfly McQueen's professed knowledge of midwifery, and finding her as ignorant as herself, slaps her in rage and terror, the moment can stun us with a question: What was the white girl assuming about blackness when she believed the casual claim of a black girl, younger and duller and more ignorant than herself, to know all about the mysteries of childbirth? The assumption, though apparently complimentary, is dehumanizing—with such creatures knowledge of the body comes from nowhere, and in general they are to be trusted absolutely or not at all, like lions in a cage, with whom you either do or do not know how to deal. After the slap, we are left with two young girls equally frightened in a humanly desperate situation, one limited by a distraction which expects and forgets that it is to be bullied, the other by an energetic resourcefulness which knows only how to bully. At the end of Michael Curtiz' *Breaking Point*, as the wounded John Garfield is carried from his boat to the dock, awaited by his wife and children and, just outside the circle, by the other woman in his life (Patricia Neal), the camera pulls away, holding on the still waiting child of his black partner, who only the unconscious Garfield knows has been killed. The poignance of the silent and unnoticed black child overwhelms the yarn we had been shown. Is he supposed to symbolize the fact of general human isolation and abandonment? Or the fact that every action has consequences for innocent bystanders? Or that children are the real

sufferers from the entangled efforts of adults to straighten out their lives? The effect here is to rebuke Garfield for attaching so much importance to the loss of his arm, and generally to blot out attention to individual suffering by invoking a massive social evil about which this film has nothing to say.

The general difference between a film type and a stage type is that the individuality captured on film naturally takes precedence over the social role in which that individuality gets expressed. Because on film social role appears arbitrary or incidental, movies have an inherent tendency toward the democratic, or anyway the idea of human equality. (But because of film's equally natural attraction to crowds, it has opposite tendencies toward the fascistic or populistic.) This depends upon recognizing film types as inhabited by figures we have met or may well meet in other circumstances. The recognized recurrence of film performers will become a central idea as we proceed. At the moment I am emphasizing only that in the case of black performers there was until recently no other place for them to recur in, except just the role within which we have already met them. For example, we would not have expected to see them as parents or siblings. I cannot at the moment remember a black person in a film making an ordinary purchase—say of a newspaper, or a ticket to a movie or for a train, let alone writing a check. (*Pinky* and A *Raisin in the Sun* prove the rule: in the former, the making of a purchase is a climactic scene in the film; in the latter, it provides the whole subject and structure.)

One recalls the lists of stars of every magnitude who have provided the movie camera with human subjects—individuals capable of filling its need for individualities, whose individualities in turn, whose inflections of demeanor and disposition were given full play in its projection. They provided, and still provide, staples for impersonators: one gesture or syllable of mood, two strides, or a passing mannerism was enough to single them out from all other creatures. They realized the myth of singularity—that we can still be found, behind our disguises of bravado and cowardice, by someone, perhaps a god, capable of defeating our self-defeats. This was always more important than their distinction by beauty. Their singularity made them more like us—anyway, made their difference from us less a matter of metaphysics, to which we must accede, than a matter of responsibility, to which we must bend. But then that made them even more glamorous. That they should be able to stand upon their singularity! If one did that, one might be found, and called out, too soon, or at an inconvenient moment.

What was wrong with type-casting in films was not that it displaced some other, better principle of casting, but that factors irrelevant to film-making often influenced the particular figures chosen. Similarly, the familiar historical fact that there are movie cycles, taken by certain movie theorists as in itself a mark of unscrupulous commercialism, is a possibility internal to the medium; one could even say, it is the best emblem of the fact that a medium had been created. For a cycle is a genre (prison movies, Civil War movies, horror movies, etc.); and a genre is a medium.

As Hollywood developed, the original types ramified into individualities as various and subtle, as far-reaching in their capacities to inflect mood and release fantasy, as any set of characters who inhabited the great theaters of our world. We do not know them by such names as Pulcinella, Crispin, Harlequin, Pantaloon, the Doctor, the Captain, Columbine; we call them the Public Enemy, the Priest, James Cagney, Pat O'Brien, the Confederate Spy, the Army Scout, Randolph Scott, Gary Cooper, Gable, Paul Muni, the Reporter, the Sergeant, the Sheriff,

the Deputy, the D.A., the Quack, the Shyster, the Other Woman, the Fallen Woman, the Moll, the Dance Hall Hostess. Hollywood was the theater in which they appeared, because the films of Hollywood constituted a world, with recurrent faces more familiar to me than the faces of the neighbors of all the places I have lived.

The great movie comedians—Chaplin, Keaton, W. C. Fields—form a set of types that could not have been adapted from any other medium. Its creation depended upon two conditions of the film medium mentioned earlier. These conditions seem to be necessities, not merely possibilities, so I will say that two necessities of the medium were discovered or expanded in the creation of these types. First, movie performers cannot project, but are projected. Second, photographs are of the world, in which human beings are not ontologically favored over the rest of nature, in which objects are not props but natural allies (or enemies) of the human character. The first necessity—projected visibility—permits the sublime comprehensibility of Chaplin's natural choreography; the second—ontological equality—permits his Proustian or Jamesian relationships with Murphy beds and flights of stairs and with vases on runners on tables on rollers: the heroism of momentary survival, Nietzsche's man as a tightrope across an abyss. These necessities permit not merely the locales of Keaton's extrications, but the philosophical mood of his countenance and the Olympic resourcefulness of his body; permit him to be perhaps the only constantly beautiful and continuously hilarious man ever seen, as though the ugliness in laughter should be redeemed. They permit Fields to mutter and suffer and curse obsessively, but heard and seen only by us; because his attributes are those of the gentleman (confident swagger and elegant manners, gloves, cane, outer heartiness), he can manifest continuously, with the remorselessness of nature, the psychic brutalities of bourgeois civilization.

Notes

1 This idea is developed to some extent in my essays on *Endgame* and *King Lear* in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Scribner's, 1969).
2 André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 97.
3 Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures," repr. in Daniel Talbot, ed., *Film* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 28.
4 Arnold Hauser, "The Film Age," repr. in Talbot, *Film*, 74.
5 Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Moving Pictures," 18.
6 Ibid. 24.
7 Ibid. 25.

3 Screen Acting and the Commutation Test

JOHN O. THOMPSON

I

At the moment, only those who oppose the semiotic study of the cinema seem to want to talk about screen acting. Since a good deal of the meaning of the fiction film is borne by its actors and their performances, this amounts to leaving an important territory in the hands of the enemy (to put it over-belligerently). And some of the standard doctrines and endlessly rediscovered 'truths' about actor and role, screen vs stage and so on may be inhibiting not only critical but also creative practice in the cinema. Yet it is understandable why this gap in the semiotic programme remains. Performances seem ineffable, and thinking about them induces reverie rather than analysis.

In this essay I want to propose the controlled extension of one semiotic technique as a way of rehabilitating one mode of reverie. The technique is called the *commutation test* in European structural linguistics. I hope it will be plain that I do not believe that importing the technique will suddenly make our discourse about acting 'scientific': any advantage it brings will be more modest. However, I do think we need to start prompting a more methodical and reflexive discourse in this whole area, and here the *test* may help.

II

To begin with, here is a quotation from a recent essay by David Thomson which exemplifies, very flexibly and intelligently, the reverie approach to screen acting. The point the quotation first makes is a familiar one. Brecht, summing up a conversation with Adorno in his diary in 1942, asserted that 'the theatre's first advantage over the film is . . . in the division between play and performance', and continued 'the mechanical reproduction gives everything the character of a result: unfree and inalterable'.[1] Thomson says the same thing, and then – but hesitantly, as if the exercise he proposes is somehow methodologically indefensible – manoeuvres around this apparent blockage at the heart of the cinema's 'nature':

> Stage parts are like concertos – they are supple, lofty and impersonal enough to take on all corners. But parts in films live only briefly: like virginity, once taken, they are not there

to be inhabited again. Before shooting, all manner of choices may perplex the film-makers and keep the part blurred: Kim Novak's part(s) in *Vertigo* were designed for Vera Miles; Shirley Temple was first choice to play Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* – imagine how 'Over the Rainbow' might have been cosy and wistful instead of the epitome of heartbreaking dreams. . . . Once a film is made no one else can play the part. . . . the text in movies is the appearance.

All credit then to Andrew Sarris . . . for indicating the waste in arguing over Vivien Leigh or Merle Oberon in Wyler's *Wuthering Heights*. And yet . . . the critic can usefully learn things about film through such speculations. . . . If *Vertigo* had had Vera Miles then the girl might have been as near to breakdown as the wife in *The Wrong Man*, and not the numb pawn of the plot that makes Novak pathetic and touching. . . . Or – think how sentimental *Kane* might be if Spencer Tracy had been the tycoon. That is useful if only to show how little conventional feeling the film has.[2]

What I am struck by is an analogy between 'such speculations' and an 'operative concept . . . already found in Trubetzkoy, but . . . established under its present name by Hjelmslev and Udall, at the Fifth Congress of Phonetics in 1936'.[3] The name given was *commutation*, a word with unfortunate penal implications in English but originally synonymous with 'substitution'.[4] Roland Barthes discusses the commutation test in *Elements of Semiology*, but in a very compressed manner:

> The commutation test consists of artificially introducing a change in the plane of expression (signifiers) and in observing whether this change brings about a correlative modification on the plane of contents (signifieds). . . . if the commutation of two signifiers produces a commutation of the signifieds one is assured of having got hold, in the fragment of syntagm submitted to the test, of a syntagmatic unit: the first sign has been cut off from the mass.[5]

Giulio Lepschy puts it even more briefly:

> By the *commutation test* we can check whether an exchange of elements on one plane entails a corresponding exchange on the other plane: if so we have two different elements; otherwise we have two variants of the same element.[6]

What do these formulations mean? Some differences in language make a difference semantically; others don't, though they are perceptible and may bear information about the speaker's region, social class, sex, and so forth; still others are imperceptible save by means of sophisticated measuring instruments. The difference between *p* and *b* is of the first sort (*path* and *bath* are different words), while that between a higher *a* as pronounced in the north of England and the lower *a* of the south is of the second sort (*bath* is the same word with either *a*). The commutation test strictly speaking simply involves trying out a sound change and observing whether a meaning change is produced or not. *Which* meaning change may be irrelevant, because of the arbitrary, unmotivated linkage in language between sound and meaning.[7] Thus, at the phonological level, there is no regularity in the shift of meaning produced by a given substitution: *path* is not to *bath* in any relation such that *pushed* and *bushed* are in the same relation. But at the morphological level – the level of minimal *meaning* units

– some such alternations show significant regularities: e.g. *ride:rode*; *stride:strode*. This takes us into an area in which Saussure was prepared to speak of the linguistic sign's *relative motivation*.[8] How does this compare with what Thomson is doing? He is proposing the substitution in thought of one actor for another, in order to observe not merely *if* a difference in meaning results but *which* difference results. And he is doing so in a context in which we naturally feel that motivation of the sign is important: our sense of whether X is 'right for the part'[9] depends upon canons of suitability governing the signifier(actor) – signified(role) link which we generally assume to be non-arbitrary. One useful effect of thinking about commutation with the phonological analogy in mind is that it encourages us to query these assumptions about suitability, which turn out to be suffused with ideology and to shift with history. But there is no reason to believe that somehow with analysis all motivation should be shown to be illusory (reduction of cinema to language): ideology is not illusion.

III

It might seem that testing for whether substituting one actor for another makes any difference to a film's meaning would be pointless: 'Of course it must!' But this is not so. The stuntman, for instance, or the nude-scene stand-in both supply presences to the screen which have to seem indistinguishable from those of the actor or actress who is being stood in for: here much trouble is taken to ensure that the actual substitution of one body for another makes no difference to the text. Extras may generally be commuted with little if any change of meaning resulting. It's interesting to find that Equity's agreement with Thames Television explicitly defines an extra as 'a performer who is not required to give individual characterisations'[10] – that is, a performer who need not, indeed should not, *distinguish* himself or herself. It is not surprising that one un-distinguished figure can be indistinguishably replaced by another. What constraints there are on meaning-preserving replacements seem to operate on the level of the crowd (or a more abstract unit such as the set of passers-by through the whole film): we would notice if *everyone* on the streets happened to be female, or to be bald, and so forth. There is an intermediate range of quite minor characters where the situation is blurred, but since the more films one has seen the more subtle individuations one picks up in the minor roles, it might be safest to treat them as functioning distinctively for the 'ideal viewer'. But occasionally indistinguishability is sought deliberately for the sake of the narrative. In Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* the promiscuity and vulgar funlovingness of Guy's wife Miriam is in part established by having her taken to the amusement park by *two* bland young men – who remain indistinguishable from one another over repeated viewings.

IV

Commutation is a device which is designed to allow us consciously to grasp units which were previously invisible, submerged in the smooth operation of the sign system in question. This is why it can work introspectively: one *asks oneself* if a change in the signifier would make a difference, and the answer can surprise one. To reject such devices as unnecessary is to claim that one possesses already both a competence in the language in question and a working theory of that competence. Where phonology is concerned, the latter claim is unlikely to be

justified, because we devote so little attention ordinarily to observing minutely the sounds of our speech. But if all that the commutation of actors reveals is that Cary Grant is not Gary Cooper, it certainly isn't worth the trouble: our existing grasp of that gross difference is adequate enough already. If commutation is to justify itself in screen acting analysis, it must reveal something more delicate and less obvious. Why shouldn't we think of a screen performance as composed of 'finer' elements, *features* in the linguistic sense?

> Each of the segments in a word can be described as being the sum of a number of components or features. Thus the consonant *m* at the beginning of the word *man* can be said to have the feature of being voiced, the feature of being made at the bilabial place of articulation, the feature of being a nasal, and so on.[11]

The obvious answer is that John Wayne is more complex than a phoneme: whereas a phoneme can be characterized exhaustively in terms of a restricted number of features (Jakobson and Halle manage with twelve),[12] such an analysis is out of the question for the actor's rich and shifting screen presence. But if we move from phonological features to semantic features, the suggestion may not seem so wild. While no one could claim that we are even near to a generally acceptable account of natural language semantics, it can at least be said that:

> most current semantic theories, and many traditional ones too, analyze meaning into 'smaller' component meanings, and assign to a lexical item a semantic representation consisting of a complex of semantically primitive elements.[13]

Here a typical feature would be not ±*voiced* or ±*nasal* but ±*abstract* or ±*animate* or ±*male*. How far decomposition into semantic features can be taken is currently a highly controversial question[14] but it seems undeniable that componential analysis captures many necessary generalizations about the meaning relations between a word and the rest of the lexicon.

V

Let us see how far the notion of a film performance as a bundle of distinctive features can take us. Each feature functions as a potential distinguisher both within the film itself and in the indefinitely-extending space established by viewers' familiarity with cinema in general. For instance John Wayne's features contrast not only with James Stewart's in the films they both appear in but with Jean-Paul Belmondo's, even if the two actors have never in fact been textually juxtaposed. Texts leave some features and feature-contrasts wholly unthematized and others only implicitly thematized in order to concentrate explicitly on comparatively few. Unthematized features could be altered or redistributed without any change in the meaning of the film resulting. Members of a chain-gang or a chorus-line are distinguished from one another, like the rest of us, by the colour of their eyes; but switching eye-colours around would generally make no difference to the text. Perhaps most feature-contrasts are only lightly or implicitly thematized: switching features turns out when one thinks about it to make some difference – perhaps a great deal: a woman in the chain-gang? – but the film operates in such a way as not to encourage one to think about this. Here the commutation test has a useful de-naturalizing function. The canons of verisimilitude,

plausibility, referentiality and so on that are operating suddenly become visible: *of course* there aren't co-ed chain gangs, the athletic hero can't be a dwarf, the Western hero can't have a Liverpool accent. In every film certain contrasts become highly thematized, presenting themselves as 'what the film is about'. Two or more characters are set up as rivals, as alternative love- or hate-objects (for other characters or the audience or both), as debaters, as couples, etc. *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*; Wayne and Stewart in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*; Bogart and Bacall *passim*; Ava Gardner and Grace Kelly in *Mogambo*; the cousins in *Les Cousins*: here and everywhere in the cinema the audience is explicitly called upon to compare and contrast.

So far we have been talking about features as they pertain to actors as 'nouns', but there is no reason in principle not to extend the programme to the analysis of characters' actions (to the enacted equivalents of 'verb' or 'adjective' predicates) and to the manner in which the actions are performed ('adverbial' features). For critical and pedagogical purposes it is sometimes helpful to restrict oneself to, or at least to set out from, contrasts explicitly thematized in a particular film; this guarantees the pertinence of the features scrutinized and keeps the set of possibilities to be commuted finite. Since, for example, we have no satisfactory finite list of types of smile (although we can assign smiles to categories fairly precisely – thin-lipped, crazy, timid, etc.), running through smile-types at random can seem pointless. But the contrast between the smiles of Ava Gardner and Grace Kelly in *Mogambo* is part of the system of that film. Imagining switching the smiles around, so that the young, inexperienced blonde has the sensual, shrewd, good-humoured smile while the older, experienced brunette has the repressed, seldom-used smile, teaches us a good deal about the system of assumptions about types of women which Ford is working within here.[15] Yet it would be wrong always to limit commutation to contrasts embodied in the text. Commuting smiles in *Mogambo* with smile-types wholly foreign to the film (a crazy smile or a cruel smile, say) might or might not be unprofitable depending on the investigation in hand. Such a commutation might be pertinent to an examination of the bounds of decorum within which women in a film like *Mogambo* must keep if the overall good-humour of the action is to be sustained and the audience remain unthreatened. When the feature in question is part of a clearly limited paradigmatic set, we need worry even less about applying commutation independently of the film's own thematized contrasts. Perhaps the most obvious example of such a set is the male–female opposition: commutation here almost always has dramatic effects which get us to the heart of 'ordinary sexism' very quickly.

VI

Does one test by commuting whole actors or just features? This will depend. Commuting actors may be wasteful and lead to blurry intuitions: if it is already clear which feature is pertinent, manipulating it on its own may be indicated. And what presents itself as a whole-actor commutation may really be a single-feature commutation in disguise. Take the following sharp comment by Marjorie Bilbow, reviewing *Looking for* Mr. *Goodbar*:

> A woman seeking the release of sex without love will still attract moral judgements when films about men doing exactly the same thing are taken for granted. In fact, it makes a salutary mental exercise to transpose the lead characters in *Mr. Goodbar* and Truffaut's

The Man Who Loved Women, which is primarily a light comedy. Both die sudden and violent deaths at the end; which of the two would you then say is being punished for sinning?[16]

Clearly Marjorie Bilbow is not actually proposing that we check the differences between Diane Keaton and Charles Denner (or between the roles they play) feature by feature as we transpose them. The relevant feature – gender – is already obvious. The use of speaking of the whole roles here is that it points up that not only sexual behaviour but ultimate fate stays constant under transposition; what varies as gender varies is the moral evaluation of that fate. Thus the *unexpected* 'unit' that the commutation isolates lies on the plane of the film's ethical signifieds. In general, whole-actor commutation is useful when it is not yet clear which feature(s) will turn out to be pertinently differential, or how one feature aligns itself with others to effect a single thematized contrast. One feature of Diane Keaton as Teresa in *Mr. Goodbar* is her hair colour; but how this operates as a signifier in the film comes into focus less when we commute just hair colours – can she be a red-head? – than when we commute Keaton with Tuesday Weld as the blonde older sister, whose dyed-blondeness goes with *only-apparent* innocence in her father's eyes but with *real* dumbness, contrasting with Teresa's educatedness, sincerity, guilt in her father's eyes.

VII

The sort of 'units' that commuting actors isolates – features or traits – are themselves clearly not unanalysable primitives: a tempting but very ambitious programme would be to aim at a decomposition of physiognomies, smiles, gaits, and similar behaviours into distinctive features specified in physiological terms in the same way that phonological features are specified in terms of the mechanisms of the mouth, throat and tongue. Someone with a penchant for rigour might claim that characterizations such as 'nervous smile' or 'crazy smile' are hopelessly imprecise and impressionistic ('tight-lipped smile' being closer to a satisfactory description). However, there are good reasons for not taking the rigourist too seriously, though students of the cinema probably should pay more attention to recent advances in the study of non-verbal communication than we usually do.[17] One trouble with the rigourist's programme is that for many inquiries it would be diversionary: the level of codedness one is interested in is more 'macro', more capable of being related to economic, political and ideological structures. But there is also a problem in principle about the search for primitive elements of behaviour: we have no guarantee that concepts such as 'suave, sophisticated manners', 'crazy smile', 'dizziness' (as in 'dizzy blonde') group together behaviours which are physiologically unitary. That is, there are almost certainly a number of muscularly distinct smiles which in this culture we would group together as 'crazy', and this would be even more true of what 'sophistication' or 'ruggedness' collect; yet it is at the level of these cultural groupings that we need to operate. Too 'micro' an analysis can destroy the object we are concerned with.

Commutation does respond to one element in the rigourist's reproach, in that its effect is to keep before our attention how problematic the terms we use to characterize differences among performances are. There seem to be differences without terms to capture them,[18] and terms which bundle together an indefinite range of differences. (But in this respect our

language operates.) This allows for considerable mobility over time in the conceptualizing of performances and their details: to recapture the terms that would have been used to characterize features of a silent film performance, for instance, often requires a considerable effort of historical imagination.

VIII

Analysing an advertisement for Chanel No. 5 perfume consisting of a close-up of Catherine Deneuve, a picture of a bottle of the perfume, the brand-name in large letters at the bottom of the page and 'Catherine Deneuve for Chanel' in small letters just above this, Judith Williamson sees Chanel as using 'what Catherine Deneuve's face *means to us*' already to establish 'what Chanel No. 5 is trying to mean to us, too':

> It is only because Catherine Deneuve has an 'image', a significance in one sign system, that she can be used to create a new system of significance relating to perfumes. If she were not a film star and famous for her chic type of French beauty, if she did not *mean* something to us, the link made between her face and the perfume would be meaningless. So it is not her face as such, but its position in a system of signs where it signifies flawless French beauty, which makes it useful as a piece of linguistic currency to sell Chanel.[19]

Meaning in a sign system depends on difference; Williamson chooses as a differing woman-sign a model who appears in the ad campaign for Fabergé's *Babe* perfume:

> Catherine Deneuve has significance only in that she is not, for example, Margaux Hemingway. . . . The significance of [the latter's] novelty, youth and 'Tomboy' style, which has value only *in relation* to the more typically 'feminine' style usually connected with modelling, is carried over to the perfume: which is thus signified as new and 'fresh', in relation to other established perfumes. There would be no significance at all in the fact that Margaux Hemingway is wearing a karate outfit and has her hair tied back to look almost like a man's, were it not that *other* perfume ads show women wearing pretty dresses and with elaborately styled hair.[20]

I think Williamson's discussion may overstate the ultimate reducibility to difference of this whole realm of signification, but this is not to say that difference is not immensely important. I want to use Deneuve as an example of the operation of 'the formal relations of pre-existing systems of differences', because the systems are not only what 'advertisements appropriate'[21] but are in the cinema important determinants of *casting*.

Williamson's argument is that we have a much more secure grasp of the difference between Deneuve and Hemingway than have, or could ever have ('perfumes *can* have no particular significance')[22] – with respect to the product; so that transferring the former difference to the latter realm has a persuasive, because cognitive, effect.[23] The question is, in what sense do those firm Deneuve–Hemingway differences exist before one makes that specific comparison? It arises for me with special force in this particular case because it was possible for me fully to follow Williamson's discussion although I knew nothing whatsoever of Margaux Hemingway

before reading it. In effect, Williamson has performed a Deneuve–Hemingway commutation, and my prior ignorance of one element in the commutation has not prevented it from 'working'. How can this be? Actually, the significances which Williamson ascribes to Deneuve – '*famous* for her *chic* type of *French* beauty . . . *flawless*' – are not in an uncomplicatedly differential relationship to those of the Hemingway 'image'. Logically enough, but also as if to compensate for Deneuve's *+fame*, Hemingway has *+novelty* whereas Deneuve has *–novelty* (the link between her and Chanel has been maintained for an unusually long time). But one would hardly assign *–chic* to Hemingway (although the *type* of chic shifts); her *–French* trait is not unequivocal ('Margaux' vs 'Margo',[24] and perhaps a whiff of 'American-in-Paris'-ness left over from another Hemingway); and while someone engaged in karate seems unlikely to maintain 'flawless beauty', one clearly could not speak of a 'flawed beauty'. The underlying contrast seems to involve something like *±mobility*: Hemingway can retain her sort of beauty in motion, whereas one cannot imagine the Chanel Denueve being able to move much without her beauty becoming flawed.

What seems to happen is that such individual images as Deneuve's or Hemingway's find or make their place(s) within a network of differences already provided for *by the language*; it is within language that the contrast 'feminine'/'Tomboy' is kept 'in place', and this is a necessary condition for that contrast's embodiment both in the real and in image-deployment within specialized discourses like advertising. At this level, the same contrast *±feminine* could be embodied by an indefinite number of different figures. But conversely each individual figure is a composite of an indefinite number of determinations, and while only a subset of these will be highlighted by any given commutation, it will still put into play contrasts involving more than a single feature. This means that a contrast on *±mobility* will always involve more than *just* that once the specific feature-bundle 'Margaux Hemingway' is chosen to embody one pole, even when the other pole is left general ('other perfume ads show women wearing pretty dresses and with elaborately styled hair'); and it will become even richer once the specific feature-bundle 'Catherine Denueve' is installed at the other pole. This detailed richness is what could not have existed before I knew about Margaux Hemingway, and each new bit of data I acquire about the image enriches the contrast further. But the concepts to illustrate which Williamson posed the contrast of the two images are not dependent upon this richness: many models and actresses could have been chosen who would have embodied any one feature contrast just as well.

The main difference between choosing a model for an advertisement and casting for a film is that the requirements of narrative structure in film, however constraining on their own level, put the features of the actor into play more actively than advertisements do. If there is a single image of Deneuve at work in the Chanel ads and in her films, it is presented and developed more unpredictably where narrative brings out its potential ambiguities.

When Burt Reynolds asked Robert Aldrich to direct him in *Hustle*, Aldrich said:

> 'I'll do this picture on one condition: that you help me get Miss Chanel.' Because the woman's part had been written for an American, and I didn't think it worked that way. I think our middle-class mores just don't make it credible that a policeman can have a love relationship with a prostitute. Because of some strange quirk in our backgrounds, the mass audience doesn't believe it. It's perfectly all right as long as she's not American. So Burt accepted this as a condition, and we put up our money and went to Paris, and waited on the great lady for a week, and she agreed to do the picture.[25]

Here the role in the script included the feature *+American*, and the director modified this to *–American* on credibility grounds. Whether or not Aldrich's unacceptability intuition about the cluster *+American +prostitute +loved by policeman* was idiosyncratic[26] (the casting of Deneuve seems to me to be splendid, but I wouldn't have thought credibility was its strong point), certainly underdetermines the choice of Deneuve from the very large set of un-American actresses. The associative leap to 'Miss Chanel' shows that more of the 'Deneuve' feature-bundle was involved, and the tone of the remark about 'waiting on the great lady'[27] might suggest that part of this might be a certain wish to flaw the 'unflawed', to exploit the possibilities of the Miss-Chanel-as-prostitute twist. But there must be something about the bundle which facilitates this twist anyway, since any specification of Deneuve's image in terms of film roles would have to take Buñuel's *Belle du Jour* as a central text. While it and *Hustle* draw on the features that make Deneuve an appropriate signifier for Chanel, both films in different ways put these features at the service of narratives which draw out their darker implications – in *Belle du Jour* the *– mobility* feature is used to connote both frigidity and corpselikeness; in *Hustle* the 'flawlessness' is made to begin to crack around the edges.

A Catherine Deneuve ad and a Catherine Deneuve film clearly both operate as closed texts to a greater or lesser degree (both *Belle du Jour* and *Hustle* being more open than many, as it happens, whereas a more conventional film such as Terence Young's *Mayerling* might even exceed Chanel ads in closure): but the mechanisms by which they achieve their closure are different, and are themselves made visible by the commutation we achieve by holding Deneuve constant while changing the textual practices which serve as the context of her presentation. The ever-open possibility of doing this leaves the Chanel advertisements open to a certain subversion. So does the way that the Deneuve image is built up from appearances of which some are so narratively charged: Chanel cannot prevent us from thinking of the parts Deneuve has played for Buñuel and Aldrich, with their unwanted, unsettling features.

IX

There is room for a great deal of detailed research on the history of casting. The breathless run-through of casts once contemplated for well-known films given in a recent article by Linda Rosencrantz[28] illustrates the sort of material which could be of great use in determining which star images were contemplatable for which roles at a given time. It would be good to have accounts of actual casting practice detailed enough to serve as a control on the intuitions commutation affords us about possible and impossible matchings of actor to role. Clearly, casting is subject to powerful ideological constraints. A given role must be filled by someone who possesses or can assume the features felt necessary to sustain it, and both the determination of the features in the script and the organization of their textualisation in the course of filming will be governed by ideological assumptions about what is 'natural' and 'goes without saying'.

In Don Siegel's *The Shootist*, John Wayne plays an aging gunfighter dying of cancer and James Stewart plays the doctor who diagnoses the disease. I have never met anyone who could imagine the casting reversed, yet it's hard to see why. Most people, after some thought, say that they can imagine Stewart in the Wayne role (it helps to think back to Stewart's unmannered performances in Anthony Mann Westerns). What seems 'ungrammatical' is Wayne as a doctor. But what is it that we think we know about doctors that makes Wayne's

bundle of traits incompatible with his being one? An adjective which sometimes gets used to describe Wayne is 'rugged': this is not incompatible with delicacy, as any reviewing of *Rio Bravo* reminds us, but it does seem incompatible with the sort of *indoor* and *studied* (the product of study) delicacy of movement that a doctor, especially a surgeon, is felt to need. Of course the frontier doctor in Westerns isn't exactly a Dr. Kildare, but his lack of polish is generally presented as a *decline*, however good-natured, from an earlier level of competence reached 'back East'. The frontier doctor can thus deviate in the direction of a certain ruggedness (often on account of Drink), but he generally retains such unrugged features as – *tall* and – *athletic*. A counter-example in terms of these specific features, Victor Mature's Doc Holiday in Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, is tall and athletic but consumptive, alcoholic and bookish; commuting Wayne with Mature here would be unthinkable.

This would seem to suggest, that, outside the specific generic context of the Hospital drama, the medical profession is somehow not seen as *macho* enough to sustain a central position within the Hollywood narrative. (Think how impossible it is that *The Shootist* be *about* James Stewart.) Yet this is puzzling, because the medical profession clearly does not lack prestige in America. Why should the role of gunman be worth so much more narratively? This is the sort of question that the facts revealed by commutation force us to ask. They are not easily dealt with by any 'reflection' or 'inverted reflection' model of ideology in fiction – whether what is thought to be reflected is the real or the producing culture's ideal.

X

I want to conclude briefly by returning to Brecht's 'fundamental reproach', which was that because in the cinema the role and the performer are one, there is no possibility of introducing the sorts of gap between them that promotes reflection. There is a problem here, but it does not seem to be insuperable if we are prepared to take as our unit of experience of the cinema, not just the text itself as subject to/contributor to a larger system of possibilities and impossibilities which is like, and to a large extent depends upon, our language. This involves recognizing that like language the sign systems of the cinema are never texually embodied all at once: to restrict analysis to the 'text itself', to rule out counter-factual statements on methodological grounds, would be a surrender to dogmatic empiricism.

A limited gap is opened between actor and role, I think, by the star system itself, with its encouragement to the viewer to see a single figure on the screen as both role and star. What is needed to exploit that gap and open it wider is an awareness, which teaching can promote, of the dependence of both role-meaning and star-meaning upon a network of differences correlated with one another in seemingly naturalized, hence suspect, ways. My practical claim for the commutation test is that it promotes in the viewer the right sort of suspicion.

Notes

1 Ben Brewster, 'The fundamental reproach (Brecht)', *Cine-tracts*, no. 2, Summer 1977, pp. 44–53.

2 David Thomson, 'The look on an actor's face', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 46, no. 4, Autumn 1977, pp. 240–44.

3 Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, London, 1967, p. 65.

4 This is the Oxford English Dictionary's third sense for the word. The first usage it records in this sense is, as so often when concepts which will turn out to be useful to a science of signs are concerned, theological. Hooker in 1597 wrote of 'a kind of mutuall commutation . . . whereby those concrete names God, and Man, when we speake of Christ doe take interchangeably one anothers roome'. The legal sense arises naturally enough: commutation is 'the substitution of a lesser punishment for a greater'.

5 Barthes, op. cit.

6 Giulio C. Lepschy, *A Survey of Structural Linguistics*, London, 1970, p. 72.

7 Barthes, op. cit., p. 66, quotes a machine-translation expert to just this effect: '"The difference between the significations [is] of use, the significations themselves being without importance" (Belevitch).'

8 See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, London, 1974, pp. 131–34.

9 Note that, if 'the text in movies is the appearance' and the 'result' is really 'unfree and inalterable' absolutely – i.e. if for Thomson the medium intrinsically forces actor and role to coalesce utterly for the spectator – it is hard to see how our question of 'rightness for the part' could even be raised.

10 Quoted in Manuel Alvarado and Edward Buscombe, *Hazell: The Making of a TV Series*, London, 1978, p. 20.

11 Peter Ladefoged, *A Course in Phonetics*, New York, 1975, p. 235.

12 See Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, The Hague, 1971, or Ladefoged, op. cit., pp. 240–49.

13 Janet Dean Fodor, *Semantics: Theories of Meaning in Generative Grammar*, Hassocks, 1977, p. 144.

14 See Fodor, pp. 143–214 for an up-to-date and detailed account of recent argument in the field.

15 The system in question is clearly rather widespread; exactly the same distribution of smile-types, correlated in the same way to hair-colour, turns up in Rohmer's *Ma Nuit Chez Maud*.

16 *Screen International*, no. 129, 11 March 1978, p. 30.

17 An especially heroic research project in this area is that of Ekman and Friesen, who are endeavouring to specify a Facial Action code by isolating minimal units of muscular activity in the face: '. . . we spent the better part of a year with a mirror, anatomy texts, and cameras. We learned to fire separately the muscles in our own faces.' So far the minimum units isolated number about forty-five, and the researchers have performed and photographed 'between four and five thousand facial combinations' of these units. 'If we wish to learn all the facial actions which signal emotion and those that do not . . . such a method . . . is needed.' See Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, 'Measuring facial movement', *Environmental Psychology and Nonverbal Behaviour*, no. 1, Fall 1976, pp. 56–75.

18 Cf. Eugene A. Nida, *Componential Analysis of Meaning*, The Hague, 1975, p. 19: 'It would be a mistake to think that one can always describe easily the relations between related meanings. For some sets of meanings there may be no readily available terms with which one can talk about the differences. This is true, for example, of colors. We readily recognise that the colors *violet, blue, green, yellow, red*, etc., differ from one another, but we do not have the kind of metalanguage with which we can easily speak about the differences. One could employ technical terminology based on the wavelengths of different colors, but this does not represent the manner in which we normally conceive of color differences.' It would take us too far afield to go into the matter here, but it should be mentioned that both

Wittgenstein and Lacan deny that there could be a true metalanguage for describing human action.

19 *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*, London, 1978, p. 25.

20 Ibid., p. 26.

21 Ibid., p. 27.

22 Ibid., p. 25. Smells may be meaningless but they are certainly evocative. For a very interesting discussion of why evocativeness may be raised by the fact that 'there is no semantic field of smells', see Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, Cambridge, 1975, pp. 115–19.

23 '. . . this seems like the reverse of "totemism", where *things* are used to differentiate groups of people . . .', Williamson, op. cit., p. 27.

24 An interesting problem: is there anything 'French' about the image of Catherine Deneuve if her name is taken away? (What happens if the Chanel ad remains just as it is save for the substitution of, say, 'Shirley Saunders for Chanel'?)

25 Stuart Byron (interviewing Robert Aldrich) '"I can't get Jimmy Carter to see my movie!"', *Film Comment*, no. 13, March–April 1977, p. 52.

26 In *The Choirboys* the cluster reappears, but its 'unacceptability' now inscribed within the text itself in the form of the violence of 'bad' sado-masochistic relationship leading to the policeman's shame and suicide.

27 The phrase helps clarify a second Deneuve Chanel ad reproduced by Williamson, op. cit., p. 28, in which a head-and-shoulders photograph of Deneuve with Chanel bottles bears the text 'It's one of the pleasures of being a woman'. The image might be puzzling because Deneuve is unsmiling, stern-looking, not obviously enjoying any 'pleasure' – save, perhaps, that of being 'the great lady'.

28 'The role that got away', *Film Comment*, no. 14, Jan.–Feb. 1978, pp. 42–48.

PART TWO

THE CREATION OF THE FILM ACTOR

Introduction

Early cinema's link to novelty and attractions, rather than narrative or theater, meant that not only actors from vaudeville and theater, but also non-actors caught in actualities, dancers, athletes, models, and other entertainers were put on screen. In the earliest days of cinema, an exhibitor might show one film consisting of documentary footage of a train passing by or a city street, followed by a film of a beautiful barely clad woman dancing, followed by a muscleman modeling his physique, then a stage actor "performing" a monologue in costume. In these early films, it was not only the case that the human subjects were not "ontologically favored" by the camera in relation to other objects, but also that various human subjects were of equal status. Actors and non-actors were on equal footing and neither was recognizably acting, at least not according to the understanding of acting developed in theater. Rather than acting *per se*, the actors who did participate in films were likely to be objects of display, like their non-acting counterparts. Their work on film was viewed as modeling or posing, not acting.

Instead of an organic outgrowth of stage acting, the film actor was virtually an original creation and film acting a novel profession. Whereas the essays in the last section attempted to define the ontological characteristics of the film actor as opposed to the stage actor, the essays in this section examine the transition from stage to screen historically, looking at institutional requirements, labor issues, and aesthetic transformations in light of changing technologies.

Charles Musser's essay traces the changing status of the film actor from film's beginnings to 1915. He details how film acting went from being an anonymous, casual, and intermittent profession—often assumed part-time by stage actors who were embarrassed to be associated with the new low form—to become a full-time profession that rivaled stage acting as a source of recognition, financial reward, and artistic satisfaction. Musser explains how deeply imbricated institutional issues, labor issues, and aesthetic issues were in the creation of the film actor. As film companies increased their rate of production to meet the demands of nickelodeons for story films, they hired permanent stock companies of actors. The regular rotation of actors meant that audiences began to recognize individual players, creating the conditions for a developing star system. Eventually the star system not only altered the structure of the industry, in terms of salary and publicity, but also effected changes in the mode of representation, such as the use of close-ups to focus attention on audience favorites. The rise of the feature film brought artistic