

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 musclemann 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 in 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



respectability to the motion picture and enabled high-profile crossovers from the theater to present their work to the mass market, helping to legitimate the cinema at the same time it provided the actors with new artistic challenges.

Roberta Pearson also focuses on early cinema, and particularly the transitional period between 1908 and 1913 when film's narrative techniques were reformulated. Her essay analyzes how actors in the films of D. W. Griffith gradually shifted from a "historionic" mode of performance derived from nineteenth-century theater to a "verisimilar" style that approximated contemporary perceptions of realistic behavior. "Historionic" acting adopted conventionalized gestures to externalize emotion and substitute for language. Rather than a simple or static style, however, "historionic" performance could include a range of gestures, from very small to very broad, or, as Pearson says, "checked" to "unchecked." The "verisimilar" code dropped more conventionalized codes of gesture from the historionic style in favor of more individualized gestures. It included greater use of props, smaller gestures, and more attention to the face and eyes. Arguing against a strict model of evolution, Pearson argues that the historionic and verisimilar existed alongside one another until about 1912 when the verisimilar code largely displaced the historionic, though the historionic was still used for moments of great emotional intensity.

Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs also examine the convergence of "realistic" styles and what they call "pictorial" styles in film acting during the transitional period from 1908 to 1912. But they argue that posing, a feature of Pearson's "historionic" code, should not be theoretically opposed to realism or viewed as a precursor to realism. Instead, Brewster and Jacobs suggest that theatrical styles of posing are modified to accommodate film technique. For instance, they argue that the lack of sound, the relatively small size of the actor's image—due to the great figure/camera distance and small exhibition screen—and compressed duration of a one-reel narrative may have led stage actors to adopt a *more* emphatic use of gesture in film than they would have employed on stage. Ultimately, by 1912, new editing techniques begin to interfere with the actor's performance and displaced some of the traditional functions associated with acting, such as directing the viewer's attention within a space, underscoring dramatic situations or regulating the pace of a scene. According to Brewster and Jacobs, it is not the case that editing *permitted* a verisimilar style, but the pace of a highly edited film virtually *required* it.

While the creation of the film actor and a film acting aesthetic may seem to have been fully developed by the time the classical style was established, Cynthia Baron's essay suggests that the creation of the film actor was an ongoing process and that acting professionals were still responding to new challenges in studio productions of the 1930s and 1940s. First, Baron describes how the transition to sound transformed production practices. As sound created an increasing demand for actors trained on stage, sound cinema ironically created competition with theater and led to the decline of stage productions, thus depleting acting labor resources and forcing film studios to develop other ways of training talent. No longer able to rely on a steady stream of stage actors, studios adopted their own increasingly systematic methods for training actors. Then, film performances were the result of an increased division of labor as dialogue coaches, dialogue directors, drama coaches, and drama schools became an integral, but hidden, part of the production process. Interestingly, with augmented focus on actor training, stage acting and screen acting were no longer viewed as fundamentally different. Acting professionals found ways to integrate techniques developed in silent cinema with technical and principles of stage acting. In particular, film acting teachers and coaches advocated strategies derived from, or closely resembling, the Moscow Art Theatre and Stanislavki's system.

## The Changing Status of the Actor

CHARLES MUSSER

The Kalem Girl is charming,  
And fair as the flowers in May.  
Her eyes are the sweetest upon the screen:  
They have stolen my heart away!

The year 1915 was one of accomplishment and triumph for the still young film industry. D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* was released and quickly hailed as cinema's first masterpiece. Poet Vachel Lindsay published *The Art of the Moving Picture*, comparing the movie house to an art gallery, while Harvard philosopher Hugo Münsterberg wrote *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, contending that cinema was a major art form of the twentieth century. In less than twenty years, film practice had undergone an astounding series of transformations which made this new recognition possible. The changing role and status of the film actor was one aspect of these transformations.<sup>2</sup>

When projected moving pictures were a novelty, in 1896, an exhibitor's program might follow one scene of Annabelle Moore dancing against a black background with another view of a wave crashing against the shore. These subjects were of equal status: only in later years would the subject of such "scenics" become the background for the actor's performance. Until at least 1904, production personnel, nonprofessionals, and stage actors took turns performing for the camera. J. Stuart Blackton and Albert Smith alternated working behind and in front of the camera—with Blackton playing the tramp in *Burglar on the Roof* (Vitagraph, 1898) and finally acting as magician in *The Vanishing Lady* (Vitagraph, 1898). The woman-on-the-street whose dress is lifted by air from a subway grate in *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street* (Edison, 1901) is on a par with the skilled performer in *Trappee Disabling Act* (Edison, 1901).

With the rise of story films in 1903–04, actors became a more important part of film production. *Rube and Mandie at Coney Island* (Edison, 1903) is a transitional film in this regard. In many scenes, Coney Island served as a backdrop for the performers' comic business, but in others the scenic impulse was still dominant. By the time of *The Suburbanite* (Biograph, 1904), the comic characters had assumed a more central position in the mise-en-scène. As a result, the actor's skills were increasingly called upon to create a rudimentary character. Although motion picture acting thus began to emerge as a more unified practice, the motion picture actor as such did not as yet exist. Theatrical personnel usually worked with production



companies only for brief periods of time. Stage actor Will Rising was "in hard luck" when he appeared as the Judge in *The Kleptomaniac* (Edison, 1905).<sup>3</sup> When the Edison Company made *Daniel Boone* (1906), producer Edwin S. Porter and stage manager Wallace McCutcheon hired many of their actors from a theatrical troupe presenting the Wild West show *Pioneer Days* at the New York Hippodrome. Porter and McCutcheon had to adapt their schedule to the actors' principal commitment—the show. To complete their cast, the two collaborators also had a casting call for this one film. In this way, film companies treated each film as an individual project and hired actors on a per film basis. Film acting was part-time, occasional work: a way for stage actors to supplement their income. It also was a form of anonymous employment in most circumstances. A film company rarely revealed the names of its cast; high-toned projects were among the few exceptions.

The casual, intermittent relationship between actors and film companies, prevalent before 1907, proved impractical as these companies increased their rate of production to meet the nickelodeon theaters' insatiable demands for one-reel story films. Efficient production required producers to create permanent stock companies of actors. Film acting soon became salaried employment, requiring a full-time commitment. Actress Gene Gauntier, who had enjoyed some prominence in repertory theater, agonized over her decision to stay with the Kalem Company on a long-term basis.<sup>4</sup> When it came down to making a final choice, players were often persuaded by the steady income received from film work. By 1908, there was a growing group of people who had become professional moving picture actors.

The decision to enter the film industry on a permanent basis was a particularly complicated one for actors conscious of the cinema's low status. Prestigious newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* asserted that films shown in nickelodeons encouraged wickedness and "not a single thing connected with them had influence for good."<sup>5</sup> In addition, film acting was considered less artistically demanding than stage performance. David Belasco saw cinema as a pale imitation of the theater, a form of entertainment that would soon lose its popularity. With moving pictures "the audience would always be wholly wanting the indescribable bond of sympathy which existed between the actor and his audience."<sup>6</sup> Action, not acting, was considered the keynote of motion pictures, and cinema apparently required neither the character psychology nor the actor's personality that stage performers brought to their work.

Even as critics were dismissing the film actor's profession, changes in film practice were actively reshaping the actor's role. Fiction films were heavily indebted (both directly and indirectly) to other narrative forms such as the novel, short story, and dramatic work. Story construction assumed a clear hierarchy of characters. For example, *Foul Play* (Vitagraph, 1906) focuses on three primary characters: a man who is framed for a crime, the man's wife, and the villain. The film also includes several secondary characters, such as the bank owner, as well as a cast of bit players. Upon such a hierarchy, the motion picture "star system" was to be constructed. Star systems in related practices such as theater and vaudeville, a cultural preoccupation with authorship, and the audience's desire for realistic yet larger-than-life heroes were just some of the added factors that made this development "logical" and even "natural."

From 1907 through 1909, an implicit contradiction existed between the film narratives with their hierarchy of characters and the methods of production which treated every actor the same way—at least all were paid the same amount. Actors were either regular

actors appeared weekly in a studio's offerings. Regular moviegoers soon recognized leading players and nicknamed them "The Vitagraph Girl" (Florence Turner), "The Kalem Girl" (Gene Gauntier), or "The Biograph Girl" (first Florence Lawrence, later Marion Leonard and Mary Pickford).

Changes in representation techniques enhanced those very qualities that were said to be the mark of a successful stage performance. Biograph director D. W. Griffith, in particular, introduced a more restrained, realistic acting style which developed the psychology of his characters. As he and other directors moved their cameras closer to the performers, the actors' personalities came through with increasing strength. By early 1910, one prominent critic asserted that

a competent actor or actress has practically the same chance of coming to the front on the motion picture stage as he or she has on the ordinary stage. That is what they are doing. So it comes about that the personalities of these good people are of growing interest to the public.<sup>7</sup>

Increasingly the spectator was experiencing not only a character and his/her psychology, but the personality of the actor who created that character as well. One need only contrast Lou Delaney's performances in *Foul Play* (Vitagraph, 1906) and *A Tin-Type Romance* (Vitagraph, 1910) to see the changes wrought in the intervening years.

Production companies, trade papers, and exhibitors were flooded with questions about audience favorites—not only their names, but their marital status. During late 1909, when the Edison Company found itself at a commercial disadvantage with films that were not very popular, the company sought to exploit this interest by featuring its principal players in promotional materials.<sup>8</sup> Such practices were not only designed to popularize company performers, but, by emphasizing the actors' experience with prestigious theatrical companies, they increased the prestige of moving pictures in general and Edison subjects in particular. A few months later, Kalem made another breakthrough: they offered exhibitors a lobby display with the names and pictures of its players. Despite the success of this innovation, *Moving Picture World* cautioned, "While the pictures have attained a distinct prominence in the theatrical field and are now regarded as a standard attraction, the people playing the parts in them are very sensitive about having their identity become known. . . . They have an undigested impression that the step from regular productions to the scenes before the camera is a backwards one."<sup>9</sup>

Leading actors were increasingly treated as stars, at least on a rudimentary level. Competitive bidding for the services of leading players began in December 1909, when Carl Laemmle hired away Biograph Girl Florence Lawrence for his Independent Moving Picture Company (IMP) and announced that she would be known as the IMP girl. That March, *St. Louis* newspapers suddenly reported the death of Miss Lawrence. Her many admirers were distraught, and Laemmle, who was almost certainly responsible for this misinformation, capitalized on the publicity with a special tour for his very much alive star.<sup>10</sup> The Vitagraph Company responded to this competitive move by holding "A Vitagraph Night for the Vitagraph Girl" in Brooklyn, New York. The patrons in the jammed theater sang choruses of the popular song "The Vitagraph Girl" and demanded an encore so they could sing it again.<sup>11</sup> Such reactions gave the emerging stars new confidence. When Kalem Girl Gene Gauntier was asked if she had given up the stage, she responded,



Why I haven't given it up. There is just as much art in moving picture acting, and more scope for individuality—and certainly fewer who can do it well, besides a greater field. Who knows what will be the status of the motion picture actor in ten years? It is on the flood while the theatrical situation, to put it mildly, is uncertain.<sup>12</sup>

Her faith was to be quickly confirmed.

When Florence Lawrence left Biograph for IMP, Mary Pickford soon took her place. A reviewer commented on "the pleasing kittenish playfulness of the little lady that played ingenu parts" at Biograph and predicted that "she has a future if she doesn't permit her head to get swelled."<sup>13</sup> When Lawrence left IMP for the Lubin Company late in 1910, Laemmle lured Pickford away from Biograph by offering a salary of \$175 a week. Laemmle, who understood the commercial possibilities of star power better than most of his contemporaries, did not try to promote her as the next IMP girl, but as Mary Pickford. More than a leading player, she was a star in her own right. Many of her IMP films, such as *The Dream* (1911), were star vehicles. The story's principal function was to foreground Pickford's personality, as the actress became the dominant element of the film. In a marketing ploy, Laemmle, after firmly establishing that Pickford was at IMP, stopped associating her with any specific films in his advertisements. Film exchanges were forced to purchase all the IMP films if they were to get all the Pickford films.

Between 1908 and 1911, only truly dedicated spectators or "fanatics," followed the careers of leading players. Even for this group, information was hard to gather. In February 1911, however, the *New York Telegraph* added a motion picture section to its Sunday editions, featuring portraits of leading players from all the companies. Vitagraph's J. Stuart Blackton also started the monthly *Motion Picture Story Magazine* which presented film narratives rewritten as short stories and published photographs and brief biographies of the stars. Both publications were designed for spectators rather than for members of the industry.

Increasingly exhibitors were urged to "play up the personality of the player." "To aid their efforts, the Edison Company began to advertise the names of leading actors for each of its films—this by July 1911.<sup>14</sup> The projection of slides as a primitive trailer or coming attraction was one approach: "Run a slide that you've a Vitagraph coming with Miss Turner, and then flash Miss Turner's slide. It is more than doubly effective."<sup>15</sup> Soon the business of promotion was too important to leave to the exhibitor who might—or might not—provide his patrons with the desired information. By mid-1912 several companies were using head titles to credit the leading actors. Edison, still struggling with its relatively unpopular films, went even further and introduced each player with a title caption when he or she first appeared on screen.<sup>16</sup> Short subjects, such as *Ancient Temples of Egypt* (Kalem, 1912), which showed the Kalem stock company visiting the Egyptian ruins, were ways to show actors "behind the scenes" and arouse even greater interest in their private lives as well as on-screen performances. Such innovations in promotion enabled the casual moviegoer to identify the players on the screen.

Biograph, in contrast to virtually all the other companies, refused to divulge even the names of its leading performers. This prompted one angry fan to write,

How do you feel when, attending a play on the legitimate stage, the stupid usher forgets to give you a programme? Rather uncomfortable, eh? You feel like giving Mr. Usher a good, swift kick. At present the Biograph Company is playing the role of the stupid

usher—ruining their otherwise good photoplays by the stupid narrow-minded policy of "reticence" that they foolishly adhere to.<sup>17</sup>

Film companies faced a terrible dilemma over the best ways to exploit their key actors. On one hand, "the manufacturer cannot be blamed for wanting to preserve the incognito of player and producer, for the instinct of self-preservation is a natural law and the 'star' system invariably creates abuses" such as salary demands. On the other, "the manufacturer can only avail himself of the advantage derived from the exploitation of personality since the situation has run away from him."<sup>18</sup> While Biograph argued that the company, not the individual players, was the guarantee of quality, its director, Griffith, assured the company's continued favor by turning one actor after another into a popular player. These "anonymous stars" were a contradiction in terms, and the Biograph Company lost many players, tired of anonymity, to its competitors. This was a luxury none of its rivals could afford. Biograph was a classic case of uneven development: advances in one area (Griffith's directorial innovations) allowed the company to be unresponsive in others (promotion).

As the star system emerged, it altered the structure of the industry. By 1911–12, a name player was often the most important commercial element, and salaries reflected this shift. They were said to run from \$35 to \$75 a week for regular players but up to \$400 and \$500 in the case of stars.<sup>19</sup> Elite actors justified their cost. When the Majestic Company appeared in late 1911, its success was assured because Mary Pickford was joining the organization—leaving behind Laemmle whose \$175 a week must have begun to seem paltry. By the second half of 1912, stars were using their enhanced status to start their own production companies. Gene Gauntier and director Sidney Olcott left Kalem to form the Gene Gauntier Feature Players Company, while Helen Gardner left Vitagraph for a similar purpose. These "authors" of leading roles used their position to claim authorship of the overall film.<sup>20</sup>

The emergence of the star system also had an impact on the mode of representation. Close-ups and other compositional strategies, which were largely absent in films of 1908–09, were developed by directors who were not only interested in telling a clear, logical story but in focusing attention on their popular performers. Griffith's *The Old Actor* (Biograph, 1912) is an interesting deviation from this dominant approach. Mary Pickford, who had rejoined Biograph, was the film's obvious star personality, but she was made to play a supporting role. Moreover, when Griffith uses a closer view, he moves in on the old actor, not Pickford. The director isolates a particular moment when the central character, played by W. Christie Miller (himself an old actor), reads Shakespeare.<sup>21</sup> Role and reality converge.

Within a few years, the film industry had produced and pushed to new extremes a star system similar to that in other cultural practices, notably the theater. This, however, did not mean the acceptance of cinema as an art form by "the better classes of the community." When interviewing the newspaper editors who were not only members of these elite classes but helped to shape their opinion, *Moving Picture World* found that "the present status of the motion picture came in for much hostile criticism," although the opinion makers felt "the pictures will do greater and better things in the future."<sup>22</sup> As Clayton Hamilton then observed as he reflected on cinema's cultural status, "the domain of criticism is co-extensive with the domain of art."<sup>23</sup> Until prominent newspapers reviewed films as cultural works instead of citing them as disturbing examples of low culture, the cinema could not be considered a serious art form. Late in 1911, the *New York Tribune* was still complaining about the film industry's



excessive depiction of elopements: it was not until late 1915 or early 1916 that leading members of the New York press—the *Herald*, *Tribune*, *World*, and *Times*—finally offered this kind of attention to select films.

One of the developments crucial to film's elevation in status was the appearance of the feature film. It "raised the moving picture to a plane on which it has won the admiration and loyalty of millions of new followers."<sup>24</sup> Many of these early subjects came from Europe. When the Italian-made *Dante's Inferno* was released in the United States during 1911 in five reels (approximately an hour and a half), it was shown at legitimate theaters with ticket prices as high as seventy-five cents.<sup>25</sup> One particularly important group of films starred Sarah Bernhardt: *Camille* (over two reels, Franco American Film Company, advertised in the United States in February 1912), *Queen Elizabeth* (3 reels, Famous Players Film Company, July 1912) and *La Tosca* (Universal Features, October 1912). Adolph Zukor, theatrical producer Daniel Frohman, and Edwin Porter acquired the American rights to *Queen Elizabeth* and with it convinced James O'Neill, James Hackett, and other theater stars to appear in feature-length adaptations of successful plays. As Zukor explained, "When they learned the elaborate manner in which we are going to stage their productions, their attitude changed. They saw that it would be to their advantage, that it would arouse popular interest not only in their productions but in their personalities as well."<sup>26</sup> Unlike the many American players who had defected to the motion picture industry in previous years, these actors were immensely successful in the theater, catering to the cultural tastes of the "better classes." Their acceptance of cinema, even as a means to record their stage performances for posterity, was an important step that was noted in the press. *Prisoner of Zenda* (Famous Players Film Company, 1913) with James Hackett was even reviewed favorably in New York newspapers. As the *World* observed, "The exhibition was unexpectedly successful for it sustained the interest and suspense of the audience to the end."<sup>27</sup>

When asked about the attitude of the most successful stars toward moving pictures, Daniel Frohman responded, "Most of them are trying to figure out how they can become photoplayers with the most possible grace and with the least possible loss of dignity. But they will soon come to it."<sup>28</sup> The formation of the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Film Motion Picture Company in December 1913 offered such an opportunity for many players. Its first film, *The Squaw Man* (February 1914) was based on a well-known stage play, started the renowned stage actor Dustin Farnum, and was heartily praised in the press. Four months later Lasky acquired the motion picture rights to Belasco's past and future theatrical productions including *The Girl of the Golden West*.<sup>29</sup> The original stage actors were supposed to re-create their roles whenever possible. While this did not always happen, the Lasky company gained access to actors associated with Belasco. In the case of Cecil B. DeMille's film adaptation, *The Girl of the Golden West* (January 1915), the performances were declared to equal those in the original play. After seeing the film, Belasco praised it and another adaptation as "decidedly artistic successes" and acknowledged that the medium could achieve a realism that eluded him on the stage. The "merciless eye" of the camera could be more demanding than the stage in settings and even—although this went unstated—for actors.<sup>30</sup>

Even before *The Birth of A Nation* was released in February 1915, Frohman articulated an increasingly common position. He claimed that theatrical stars making the transition to film "can degrade their art by appearing in silly and inconsequential subjects, but they can assist themselves as well as their art of the theatre by appearing in dignified dramatic productions."<sup>31</sup> Because moving pictures had much larger audience base, actors could use the cinema

to increase the size of their following. Frohman was also implying that the ideal actor was someone who could move back and forth between theater and moving pictures. As 1915 began, film not only rivaled theater as a source of recognition and financial reward, but, it was felt, offered actors a different kind of artistic challenge.

## Notes

- 1 *New York Dramatic Mirror* (5 June 1912), p. 26.
- 2 Aspects of the star system have been described by other film historians, including Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979); and Janet Staiger, "Seeing Stars," *Velvet Light Trap* (Summer 1983), pp. 10–14.
- 3 Richard Outcault to Edwin S. Porter, 3 or 4 March 1904, Porter Affidavit, Edison National Historic Site, Edison, New Jersey.
- 4 Gene Gauntier, "Blazing the Trail," unpublished manuscript, Museum of Modern Art.
- 5 *Chicago Tribune*, 10 April 1907 (reprinted in *Moving Picture World* [20 April 1907], p. 101).
- 6 "Films and the Drama," *Film Index* (5 September 1908), p. 4.
- 7 "On the Screen," *Moving Picture World* (3 February 1910), p. 167.
- 8 *Edison Kinetogram* (1 October 1909), p. 13; and *ibid.* (15 October 1909), p. 13.
- 9 "Photographs of Moving Picture Actors: A New Method of Lobby Advertising," *Moving Picture World* (15 January 1910), p. 50.
- 10 "The IMP Leading Lady," *Moving Picture World* (2 April 1910), p. 517.
- 11 "A Vitagraph Night for the Vitagraph Girl," *Film Index* (23 April 1910), p. 3.
- 12 "The Kalem Girl," *Film Index* (7 May 1910), p. 3.
- 13 *New York Dramatic Mirror* (16 April 1910), p. 18.
- 14 *Moving Picture World* (15 July 1911), p. 58.
- 15 "Advertising for Exhibitors," *Moving Picture World* (18 October 1911), p. 195.
- 16 *New York Dramatic Mirror* (29 May 1912), p. 24.
- 17 *New York Dramatic Mirror* (18 October 1911), p. 28.
- 18 "Credit Where Credit is Due," *Moving Picture World* (14 October 1911), p. 107.
- 19 *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (August 1911), p. 144.
- 20 Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-memory and Practice* ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca Cornell Press, 1977); and Robert Arnold, Nicholas P. Humy, and Ana M. Lopez, "Rereading Adaptation: A Farewell to Arms," *Iris* 1, no. 1 (1983), pp. 101–13.
- 21 Miller was the second oldest actor in the film business in 1913: *Moving Picture World* (12 April 1913), p. 152.
- 22 *Moving Picture World* (9 December 1911), p. 792.
- 23 Clay Hamilton in *The Bookman*, quoted in "Sign of the Harvest," *Moving Picture World* (5 August 1911), pp. 272–73.
- 24 "Achievements of 1911," *Moving Picture World* (13 January 1912), p. 106.
- 25 *Moving Picture World* (26 August 1911), p. 530.
- 26 "Achievements of 1911," *Moving Picture World* (13 January 1912), p. 106.
- 27 "Complete Play in Movies," *New York World* (19 February 1913), p. 7.
- 28 *Moving Picture World* (26 October 1912), p. 335.



- 29 "Lasky Gets Belasco Plays," *Moving Picture World* (6 June 1914), p. 1412.  
 30 "Pictures and Stage Totally Different," *New York Telegraph* (10 January 1915), p. 1D.  
 31 "Film Work Great for Actors," interview with Daniel Frohman, *New York Telegraph* (1 January 1915), p. 5.

## The Histrionic and Verisimilar Codes in the Biograph Films

5

ROBERTA PEARSON

### The histrionic code

Film scholars may increasingly supplement textual analysis with knowledge of how a particular text both relates to other texts and functions in the larger culture, but close formalist analysis still remains an important methodology in cinema studies and other disciplines. Even Tony Bennett and Janet Woolcott, who believe that the text is "an inconceivable object," nonetheless do not suggest that "texts have no determinate properties—such as a definite order of narrative progression—which may be analyzed objectively."<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I . . . I shall focus on these "determinate properties": [ . . . ]

- It may help to begin by formulating some general principles about the actors' use of the histrionic code at various points in the early Biographs. Most shots in these films fall into one of five categories:
- 1 the tableau;
  - 2 everyday activity;
  - 3 conversations;
  - 4 heightened emotions and action scenes with more than one performer; and
  - 5 gestural soliloquies in which an actor emotes while alone in the frame.<sup>2</sup>

As a rule, the performances in these categories tend to range from the checked to the unchecked histrionic code.

*I Madfild tableau.* Although the Biographs borrowed the tableau from the stage melodrama, they somewhat modified its usage. In the theatre, performers used the tableau to convey intense emotions in nonverbal form, freezing in place with arms fully extended outward, downward, or upward at an act's climax. A contemporary print depicting the second act of *Karl Lugin* shows the actors in the act-ending tableau: In the center a man sits in a chair, hands clasping head in an agony of despair. A young girl kneels at his feet, her right hand reaching up in supplication. To the left, an elderly gentleman has both hands raised high above his head in an appeal-to-heaven posture. To the right, a stern woman points at the girl with her left hand, while her right hand is held perpendicular to her body, the finger pointing to the door in one of the most parodied of all histrionic gestures.<sup>3</sup>



Obviously, the Biographs retained the goal of expressing strong emotion in nonverbal fashion but somewhat modified the technique. The actors eschewed fully extended gestures and kept their arms close to their bodies, expressing emotional intensity through a comparative lack of movement rather than absolute stillness. The only motionless tableau in the Biographs occurs in *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) at the moment when the poor line up to buy the overpriced bread and become perfectly motionless, contrasting with the frenzied activity of the Wheat King's party.

Usually, the actors make small gestures that contrast markedly with the more common broad gestures of the histrionic code and thus convey the impression of relative motionlessness. In the last shot of *A Drunkard's Reformation*, Arthur Johnson and Linda Arvidson sit in front of the fire with their little girl. The child sits on the floor before her father's chair, the mother sits on the arm of the chair. Arvidson has her arm around Johnson, and they hold hands. With his free hand, Johnson gestures to the girl, as if to credit her with his reformation.

**2 Everyday activity.** In scenes of everyday activity characters are shown going about their normal routine prior to the introduction of narrative disequilibrium. They might be shown at work, like the farmers plowing their fields in the opening shot of *A Corner in Wheat*, or at home, like the happy family at the beginning of *The Lonely Villa* (1909). In these shots, gesture helps to establish a character and that character's relation to other characters. The characters often handle props, such as books, or the tools of their trade, that prevent fully extended outward movements.<sup>4</sup> Gestures tend to be close to the body, fairly slow, unstressed, and not held for any significant time.

In the first shot of *Lady Helen's Escapade* (1909), Florence Lawrence portrays a bored, wealthy woman. She sits in a chair beside a table on which her arm rests, her hand dangling loosely over the front. When a maid offers food, she rejects it with a languid wave of the hand, and with she heaves a sigh, shoulders visibly moving, and yawns. All her gestures are slow, and with the exception of the wave, her arms and hands stay close to her body.

**3 Conversation.** In the Biographs, conversations among characters involve a great many gestures of a type we might call, to use a semantic term, "diectic" or "anaphoric"—the gestural equivalent of verbal "shifters," personal pronouns and words indicating place, such as *here* and *there*.<sup>5</sup> In the films, these meanings are expressed by inward movements, indicating *here*, and outward movements, indicating *you*, *there*, or similar ideas. In *A Convict's Sacrifice* (1909), the released convict, James Kirkwood, talks to a laborer, Henry Walthall, who is eating his lunch. Kirkwood points to the food and to himself and Walthall hands him the dinner pail. Then Walthall asks his boss to hire Kirkwood, pointing at himself and then the convict, as if to vouch for his behavior.

Conversational gestures usually fall somewhere between the contained stillness of the tableau and the frantic extended movement of the gestural soliloquy. In *The Voice of the Violin* (1909), Arthur Johnson proposes to Marion Leonard. He declares himself with both hands on his chest, then extends his arms one on either side of the woman. No, she says, with her hand on her chest, then points to him, then puts her hand back on her chest. We can see the gradual modifications in the histrionic code by looking at another marriage proposal, from a film released the following year. In *A Summer Idyl* (1910), Walthall proposes to a society woman (Stephanie Longfellow), who rejects him. He leans closer to her, his hand on his chest, then

his motions are slow and graceful, and his arms are never fully extended outward like Johnson's.

Because Walthall stresses his gestures less than Johnson, the performance does not connote the same degree of theatricality. This becomes clear in comparing the way each actor places his hands on his chest. Johnson uses both hands with the palms flattened, to modern eyes parodying a lover declaring himself, as the pose absolutely reeks of theatricality. Walthall places one hand lightly on his chest, the palm slightly raised and fingers slightly cupped. Though Walthall employs a conventional gesture, the lack of emphasis reduces the deliberate self-consciousness of the histrionic code.

**4 Heightened emotions and action scenes.** Categories 4 and 5 most closely resemble the stereotyped ideas of "melodramatic" acting, as performers tend to resort more to the unchecked histrionic code. The arms are fully extended upward, outward, or downward, the gestures are often more heavily stressed and quickly performed than in everyday activities or conversation, and poses are held longer. In *A Test of Friendship* (1909), Arthur Johnson receives the news that he has been ruined (financially, not morally, this latter being a woman's prerogative). His hands clutch his head and then come down, fingers spread, as his arms are held straight out to his sides. He bows his head, and his hands drop to his sides. He then looks up and clenches his fists.

In *The Call of the Wild* (1908), we see two performers enacting heightened emotions. A woman (Florence Lawrence) rejects the proposal of a "civilized Indian" (he wears a suit and attends parties). The veneer of civilization immediately vanishing, the rejected suitor (Charles Inslee) leads an Indian band on the warpath, captures his beloved, and proceeds to work his will upon her. He kisses her, and she falls to her knees, arms outstretched. Her left hand points to her chest and then to heaven, while her right hand points to him. He points to his Indian followers, as if to say, "I am one of them." She points to heaven again, her arm straight up and fully extended. Finally seeing the light, he raises both arms, sinks to his knees, lowers his head on his arms. She then points off screen right, as if to say, "Come back with me." Here we see a mixture of the diectic gesture and the unchecked histrionic code.

**5 Gestural soliloquies.** In the gestural soliloquy, the quality of the gesture remains the same as with heightened emotions, but the quantity increases. In the previous category, no single performer enacts an elaborate series of gestures because the other actors collaborate in creating an emotional effect or in telling the story. Gestural soliloquies often occur at emotional high points in which the characters undergo emotional catharsis. The characters in this situation often have only one point to make: "I am angry," "I am grief-stricken," or "I am desperate," and employ a series of gestures (sometimes repeating the same gesture), all of which express the same state of mind. While narratively redundant, the cumulative effect of the gestures is to increase the emotional impact, in keeping with the heightened emotional states characteristic of the melodramatic form. Though this repetition runs counter to injunctions against "the useless multiplication of gesture," each gesture remains distinctly separate, preserving the digital nature of the histrionic code.

The gestural soliloquy was also used to trace a character's thought processes, though the verisimilar code would better suit this function. In this case, rather than simply heightening emotional effect, the soliloquies serve to advance the narrative. In *A Burglar's Mistake* (1909), a husband (Harry Solter) contemplates suicide. As he holds the gun, he sees a boy that his young child has left in his office. He gestures to the door with his free hand, his



arm extended behind him. Then he makes a fist in the air and brings his arm sharply down and up in a semi-circle as he decides on a course of action. Note, however, that the performer's gestures might be incomprehensible without the presence of the toy, showing precisely how difficult it is to discuss performance in isolation from other signifying practices.

### The verisimilar code

Describing the operation of the verisimilar code in the Biograph's presents a more daunting task than describing the histrionic. Because the verisimilar code was intended to mimic reality and create individual characterizations, one cannot turn to mechanical formulations and prescriptions such as are found in the histrionic-code instruction manuals. Nor can one evolve general categories, illustrating each with examples, as with the histrionic code. But the discussion of the theatrical verisimilar code in the previous chapter, in conjunction with the recent work of film scholars, can point to the key characteristics of the verisimilar code in the Biograph films. As we have seen from looking at the verisimilar code in the theatre, byplay and props formed an important part of this performance style. In addition, as Gunning, Thompson, and Staiger have all asserted, use of the face and eyes constituted an extremely important component of the new style of acting in the cinema, which makes sense given the differences between the two media.<sup>6</sup>

*The New York Hat* (1912) seems a particularly appropriate starting point for the discussion of the verisimilar code, because . . . [it] contributed to Griffith's reputation among film scholars as the originator of "subtle, restrained" acting. It also features Mary Pickford, one of the "Griffith actresses" whom posterity has judged to excel at the new style, and Lionel Barrymore, a Broadway-trained actor in one of his first film roles. Both Barrymore and Pickford have scenes in which the characters' thoughts are revealed through a combination of gesture, expressions, glances, and props, so that we can begin our discussion with a look at two sequences that combine all the key components of the verisimilar code.<sup>7</sup>

Just before her death, Pickford's mother writes a letter requesting that her minister, Barrymore, buy her daughter an occasional gift. Barrymore buys Pickford the fancy New York hat of the title. The town gossips immediately begin to circulate slanderous rumors, and Pickford's harsh father tears up the hat. All ends happily as the misunderstanding is cleared up, and Barrymore and Pickford seem destined for a rosy future.

In the second shot of the film, Barrymore opens the mother's letter and the packet of money that accompanies it. As he reads the letter, his mouth opens in surprise. He picks up the money with a thoughtful expression and looks straight out, almost at the camera, while holding the money. He looks at the letter again and laughs. Placing his hand flat on the desk, he mouths: "I'll do it." He nods his head "yes" and looks at the letter again while smiling.

In a four-shot scene, Pickford examines her old hat, decides it won't do, and asks her father for a new one. In the first shot, the standard three-quarter shot of 1912, the father sits at his desk on the left and Pickford stands on the right side of the frame, her right hand at her side and her head slightly tilted as she looks up at a mirror on the wall next to her and straightens her jacket. In a cut to a medium shot, Pickford takes a hat off the wall and glances off the top with a sad expression. She puts the hat on, examines her reflection, and glances in the direction of her father. An intertitle states, "Daddy, can I have a new hat?" In three

her hat, but he gestures her away. In another cut to medium shot, Pickford takes a pair of gloves from a hook near a mirror, and straightens the mirror. She arranges the gloves in her left hand, smiles, and looks in the mirror. Looking doubtful, she takes the hat off, hangs it up, and shakes her head. Again she looks in the mirror, looks at the gloves, smiles and smooths her hair with her hand. Even without the intertitle, Pickford's performance clearly establishes her character's decision to ask for the hat and her shifting emotions, as she first tries to make do with the old hat and then decides to do the best she can without it.

Although the various elements of the code all work together to externalize mental processes, as in the above example, one can better understand the actual operation of the verisimilar code by isolating, insofar as possible, each component. We start by examining several examples of byplay, the small, realistic touches the actors called "bits of business," which are the performance equivalents of Barthes's realistic effect.<sup>8</sup>

*The God Within* (1912), with Henry Walthall, Lionel Barrymore, Blanche Sweet, and Claire McDowell, recounts the intertwined fates of two couples. Barrymore seduces Sweet and leaves her pregnant, while Walthall's wife, McDowell, announces to her husband that she too is expecting a child. McDowell dies in childbirth, Sweet's baby is born dead, Sweet acts as a wet nurse to the motherless child, and all turns out well as Walthall and Sweet form a family at the end. The acting of the principals is verisimilarly coded, and all four employ bits of business in their interchanges with other characters.

Near the start of the film, Barrymore comes to tell Sweet that he is leaving town. She sits alone, waiting for him, and when she hears his knock, wipes away her tears, clasps her hands in her lap, and smiles. As they talk, she stands close to him, her hand stroking his lapel, and then leans closer to whisper that she is pregnant. Barrymore rubs the back of his neck in perplexity and then gestures to the door with his thumb. As McDowell tells Walthall that she is pregnant her actions are similar to Sweet's. She takes his sleeve, fingers his collar, puts a hand on his shoulder, and whispers in his ear. When the doctor proposes to Walthall that he take Sweet into his home, Walthall scratches the back of his neck as he thinks. At the film's end, Barrymore comes to Walthall's cabin and proposes to Sweet. Walthall returns home and also proposes to her. Sweet picks Walthall, signaling her decision by taking his hand. The two men converse over the seated woman, and, as they talk, Sweet tilts her head so that her cheek touches her and Walthall's linked hands, the small gesture registering her character's fulfillment and happiness.

These kinds of small gestures can be combined to create the verisimilar equivalent of the gestural soliloquy, in which characters express intense emotions. But while the intent is the same, the nature of the gestures is vastly different. In *The Lesser Evil* (1911), Blanche Sweet is trapped in a boat's cabin, with only the captain standing between her and a crew of would-be rapists. She stands at the cabin door, hands around the bolt, looking upward and perfectly still except for the slight movement of her hands on the bolt. She then reloads the captain's gun, opens the door to hand him the weapon, then rebolts the door. She leans against the door, her right hand on the bolt and left hand to her face.

The impact of this scene admittedly depends on her expression as well as her gestures, but Biograph actors were fully capable of fulfilling Strindberg's wish that important scenes be acted with the back to the audience. To return to *The God Within*, Walthall has a gestural soliloquy at his wife's deathbed. His hat in his hand, he looks down at his wife and baby while he raises his hat to his mouth as if to stifle a sob. He turns his back to the camera, showing only about one-quarter of his face in profile, bows his head, and raises his hand to his eyes,



After a moment, he turns slightly back, wipes his eyes, looks down again, and kneels at the bedside. He rests his head on his upraised hand while his fingers pull at his hair. Until he kneels, we do not get a good view of his face, and his grief is indicated by posture and hand movements alone.

The byplay in *The God Within* externalizes thoughts and emotions and delineates character. But "bits of business" could also directly establish character type or create psychological complexity. In *The Broken Cross* (1911), the residents of a boarding house include a gum-chewing, slovenly servant girl and a hip-swinging, eye-bating manicurist. In *The God Within*, Barrymore reveals his character's bravado and untrustworthiness by hooking his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. . . .

Byplay also entailed the use of props. . . . In a scene from *The Inner Circle* (1912) the use of props augments the fully developed gestural byplay of the verisimilar code. An intertitle, "The Lonely Widower and his child," precedes the film's first shot. A little girl sits in a chair in a tenement room, and her father (Adolphe Lestina) enters. He walks slowly, head bowed, and carries a flower. He looks at the child, smiles slightly, sniffs the flower, and turns to look at a picture on a table behind him. His hand barely raised from the table, he extends his bent index finger toward the picture, then rests his hand on the table. The father turns to his child and offers her the flower, but she is sleeping. He straightens, looks at the picture, places the flower in front of it, rests his hands on the table, and looks up, before waking and hugging the child.

In this shot the gestures and props develop the portrait of the Lonely Widower announced by the intertitle, but Lestina communicates his sorrow for his dead wife with an upward glance, and his pity for his orphaned child by looking from the picture to her. This brings us to the second important element of the verisimilar code, the use of the eyes and the face. As in Lestina's case, the direction of the look often suffices to convey a character's thoughts (given the narrative context, that is). In [an] example from *Friends* (1912), Walthall returns from the gold fields unaware that Barrymore has preempted his place in Pickford's affections. As he and Pickford embrace, he looks over her shoulder to see the picture of Barrymore she has left out. A dawning realization crosses his face, but the mere fact of his seeing the photo indicates that the character's suspicions have been aroused. . . .

As the trade press would have said, "You can really see the actors think!" Occasionally, the later Biographs devote entire shots to a character's thoughts, with the actors reflecting on the previous action and moving very little if at all. In *Friends*, after Pickford receives a visit from Barrymore she lets him out and remains motionless, her hand on the doorknob and her eyes moving from side to side. In a similar scene in *The Lesser Evil*, Blanche Sweet has just gotten a proposal from her longtime beau. She pauses at the front door of her house, with her hands at her sides and her head down. She looks up slightly, smiles, then goes into the house. Nor is it only women mooning over their sweethearts who pause in reflection. In *Friends*, the doctor tells Walthall to wait outside while he goes inside to deliver the baby. Walthall stands for a moment with his hand on the doorknob, motionless except for his eyes moving from side to side as he contemplates his wife's fate.

. . . . Many of the "thinking" and "reflection" shots cannot and should not be separated from the editing patterns of which they are a part, nor, for that matter, from the entire narrative context. This is particularly the case with the reaction shot that reveals mental processes

view pattern began to be standardized, as several films feature sequences in which characters look through windows and then react to what they see, the reaction shot sometimes in closer scale than the rest of the film (*The Chief's Daughter*, *Enoch Arden*, *His Mother's Scarf*, *The Two Sides*).

## The code shift

By 1912 most performers, under most circumstances, in most Biographs employed the verisimilar code, some being more adept at it than others. Using the word *adapt* comes perilously close to making a value judgment about good and bad acting. What does *adapt* mean in this context? Those performers skilled in the new style used smaller gestures, gave them less emphasis, and melded them into a continuous flow. The less skilled retained elements of the histrionic code: while they might not use conventional gestures, their movements tended to be larger, more emphasized, and more discrete. Skilled performers also used more byplay and bits of business to construct their characters. Those performers whom subsequent generations have valorized as good (i.e., Blanche Sweet, Bobby Harron, Henry Walthall, Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford, Mae Marsh) are the ones who mastered the verisimilar code, so that it is possible in this instance to identify the components of "good acting" or at least specify what most people probably mean by "good acting" in the Biographs.

By 1912, however, the histrionic code had not entirely vanished. Actors still represented conversation with dialectic gestures and the occasional conventional gesture.<sup>9</sup> In *The Black Sheep* (1912) a father warns off his daughter's suitor (Charles West). The father gestures with his thumb over his shoulder in his daughter's direction, raises his hand like a police officer halting traffic, and shakes his head. In *The New York Hat*, the village gossips tell Pickford's father (Charles Males) about the minister's purchase of the hat. Their leader (Claire McDowell) takes his arm, points offscreen, and touches her hat. The father points to his chest, then his head, looks severe, clenches his fists, nods, and says thank you.

The histrionic code persisted not only in conversations but also during emotional high points. In *The New York Hat*, the father comes upon his daughter wearing the new hat. He spreads his arms wide with fists clenched, as he asks where she got it. When she answers, he runs his hands across the top of his head and yells at her, raising his clenched fists in the air. In *The Lesser Evil*, Sweet's fiancé (Edwin August) sees Sweet being kidnapped. He raises his hands high above his head, staggers back, and waves his arms.

Perhaps it was only actors less skilled at the verisimilar code who resorted to the histrionic at times of great emotion? This does not seem to be the case. Even such a master of the verisimilar code as Henry Walthall, capable, as we have seen, of portraying intense grief with his back to the camera, uses histrionic gestures. In *The God Within*, when the doctor wishes him to take his baby to Sweet, Walthall makes the standard gesture of rejection, his hand near his head, arm bent at the elbow and then brought downward and out in a thrusting-away movement. Is editing perhaps the explanatory factor? To some extent, certainly, but the histrionic code can appear in a reaction shot. In *The Inner Circle*, Lestina looks through a window, seeing his daughter in the house under which he has just planted a bomb. He staggers back, arms wide, clenching his fists.

Just as the histrionic code lasts into 1912, we can find traces of the verisimilar as early as 1908. In *One Touch of Nature* Florence Lawrence's child has died. She sits quietly staring ahead



until she picks up the child's doll and gently strokes its head, the use of the prop seeming to inhibit histrionic gestures.

The presence of the two codes in films made during the same year, and sometimes even in the same film, prevents simply declaring that the verisimilar code replaced the histrionic on a precise date in a certain film. While one can identify 1910 and 1911 as the crucial transitional years, during which the codes mingle more frequently than previously or subsequently, we cannot reduce the matter to a question of chronology, providing lengthy and tedious year-by-year descriptions of acting. Nor can we hope to identify the simple linear causality of such factors as editing patterns or a closer camera.<sup>10</sup> Rather than considering performance in isolation or in relation to one other signifying practice, we must take into account the complex interaction of performance with the entire textual system. As Metz says, "The intrinsic consideration of a code does not tell us how it may be articulated with other codes (or with which ones), and at what level it may play a part in the general economy of a long and complex text."<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Tony Bennett and Janet Woolcott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 65.
- 2 Tom Gunning also uses the term "gestural soliloquy" for this performance device in his dissertation, "D. W. Griffith and the Narrator System: Narrative Structure and Industry Organization in Biograph Films, 1908-1909" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1986), and his book *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
- 3 Gilbert B. Cross, *Next Week East Lynne* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1977), 135.
- 4 On the use of props, see also James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 84-97.
- 5 Kier EIAM, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (New York: Methuen, 1980), 72-75.
- 6 See Gunning, "D. W. Griffith and the Narrator System," 747; David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 189-191; and Janet Staiger, "The Eyes Are Really the Focus: Photoplay Acting and Film Form and Style," *Wide Angle* 6:4 (1985): 18-20. Chapter 7 of this book will look at trade press discourse on the verisimilar code, which also emphasizes the extreme importance of the face and eyes.

This footnote seems a good point to enumerate my disagreements with the Staiger article: I must first dispute Staiger's assertion that "the employment of theatre workers in filmmaking provides one of the strongest explanations for the appearance of a particular acting style" (19). One cannot, when discussing this period, simply refer to the theatre. One must specify which theatre: the "first class" Broadway house; the popular-priced theatre largely given over to the melodrama; the resident stock companies; or the touring combinations sent out by the theatrical syndicates. Without further investigation, the fact that many film directors had theatrical backgrounds proves nothing. In which theatre, employing what performance style, did they work? Griffith's theatrical experience I... I exposed him mainly to the histrionic code, though he may, of course, have seen

Of course, Griffith's attitudes, and those of his colleagues, toward acting constitute another issue, but here again Staiger oversimplifies. In the period in question, the film industry's perceptions of the relation of film to theatrical acting underwent several shifts. In 1907-1908 some critics rejected theatrical acting as unsuitable by virtue of its "repose," presumably believing that the new style would fail to "get it across." In the next few years the film industry sought, as Staiger says, to emulate the "first class theatre," but also, as she omits to mention, to distance itself from the popular-priced theatre, where the histrionic code still reigned. By 1912 the film industry had developed a consensus as to what constituted appropriate film acting, convincing itself that it could not only outdo the popular-priced theatre but could surpass the verisimilar code as seen on the legitimate stage. It is true that "by 1912, companies were filming popular stage successes with current theatrical stars" (19), but the reaction of the trade press was far from laudatory as suggested by a review of Nat Goodwin's Fagin in *Oliver Twist*: "The well defined action of the best motion picture actor is missing throughout" ("Nat Goodwin Disappointing," *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, June 5, 1912, 27). It should teach that if players of note are to enter film production it is necessary that they study to employ the art and technique of the picture, which at its best is decidedly removed from the stage.

Two methodological caveats, with which I did not wish to clutter the text, may be relevant here: The fact that most gesture is analogic rather than digital under normal circumstances prevents the analyst from segmenting gestural signification. The analyst armed with a Steenbeck flat-bed editing table can stop the flow of gesture at will. Although the technology enables us to note each small gesture, the reader should realize that this segmentation is an artificial process, and that one of the essential features of the verisimilar code is its analogical nature.

Although with the Steenbeck it becomes possible to annotate movement, assigning a specific meaning to each gesture or combination of gestures is much more difficult with the verisimilar than with the histrionic code, partly, of course, because the former is not predicated on a one-to-one correspondence between gesture and meaning. In the absence of a lexicon restricted by convention, gesture and especially a combination of gestures can take on an infinity of meaning, with the narrative context alone limiting the connotations. For this reason, the analyst's personal judgment becomes a greater factor with the verisimilar than the histrionic code. Suppose that an old man enters a shot, head bowed, shoulders sagging, arms hanging limply at sides. Does this signify defeat, despair, resignation, sadness, or simply momentary weariness? The problem becomes intensified with facial expression: two people can debate the meaning of a particular close-up for hours, as in often-cited instance of Garbo's expression in the closing shot of *Queen Christina*. Even facial expression combined with posture can defeat attempts at quick and facile interpretations. Certainly no one would dare to impose a single, precise meaning on the final shot of *Vertigo* as Jimmy Stewart, having witnessed the second death of his beloved, teeters on the brink of oblivion.

<sup>10</sup> Mae Marsh, *Screen Acting* (Los Angeles: Photostar Publishing Company, 1922), 54.

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the Biographs, actors use deictic gestures, leading me to include them in the histrionic code. However, I have no evidence that the deictic gesture was frequently employed in the theatrical histrionic code. Because the theatrical performers could have used verbal shifters and might not have needed deictic gestures, it may be the case that the standardized and conventional use of deictic gestures originates with silent film. If so,



it would be inaccurate to label conversational gestures as either histrionic or verisimilar. However, between 1908 and 1913, while actors continued to point, their pointing movements became smaller, less emphasized, and more flowing.

10 The importance of the face and eyes to the verisimilar code may tempt one to conclude that the increasing closeness of the camera between 1908 and 1913 accounts for the transformation of performance style. The reverse could just as well be true, however: the new performance style may have brought about the closer camera.

11 Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 103. Some data about changes in signifying practices during Griffith's Biograph years, particularly those practices most often associated with performance, editing, and camera distance, may be helpful. In "D.W. Griffith and the Narrator System," Gunning tells us that the average number of shots per thousand feet of film was 16.6 in 1908 and 87.8 in 1913 (761). As for scale, the long shot, with space above and below the characters' heads and feet, was standard in 1908. By 1910 the characters were framed at the ankle, and by 1911 characters were framed in three-quarter shot, which became the predominant scale of the classical Hollywood cinema. As Gunning points out, however, beginning in 1909 characters increasingly step forward to be framed between ankle and knee, so that camera distance does not remain a constant even in the earlier films.

Intertitles do not survive for many films. Because the earliest Biograph with intertitles at the Library of Congress is *A Change of Heart* (September 1909), there has been confusion about the presence of intertitles in the earlier Biograph, our knowledge of which derives primarily from the Paper Print Collection. Gunning has concluded that most, and probably all, of the Griffith Biographs originally had titles. We do know that dialogue titles became increasingly frequent, a factor bearing directly on the construction of character.

For further information about the film style in this period see Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 155–240, and Barry Salt, "The Early Development of Film Form," in John Fell, ed., *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 284–89.

## Pictorial Styles and Film Acting

# 6

### BEN BREWSTER AND LEA JACOBS

The problem I... is to register when and how actors are adapting pictorial stage traditions to the cinema. Most immediately, in our case, the problem is how to recognize a pose when we see one. I... I

In our efforts to analyse this acting style, the time of the pause could not be the sole criterion for defining a pose or attitude. Instead we have looked for the following:

- 1 There is a slight pause in the actor's movement when the film is viewed at the correct speed of projection (remember Humboldt's term, of a "hesitant calm"—*zögernde Ruhe*);
- 2 The actor assumes a stereotyped posture;
- 3 The posture expresses the character's interior state or in some other way clearly and directly relates to the dramatic situation;
- 4 The posture is systematically iterated and varied by the actor;
- 5 The blocking of the actor's movement, or of the acting ensemble, clearly leads up to the pose or leads from one pose to the next.

Obviously the frame stills used in this chapter do not 'prove' the existence of an attitude, since they represent no more than one-sixteenth of a second of the actual time of the performance. Rather, they are used to facilitate the work of description.

Poses in the sense proposed above appear in a wide range of silent film. Perhaps the most systematic attempt to describe how they function is Roberta Pearson's discussion of what she calls the 'histrionic code' of film acting at Biograph in the period between 1908 and 1912. While we find Pearson's analyses of individual films compelling, we believe the theoretical terms of her argument misrepresent pictorial styles of acting on the stage and make it difficult to understand the various ways poses were adapted to film.

Pearson defines the histrionic code in opposition to the verisimilar code. The former does not aim to create psychologically complex characters, nor an effect of realism, while the latter does. The former frankly admits its theatricality—the actor palpably 'acts', striking conventionalized poses and attitudes—while the latter eschews such self-consciousness, favouring stage business and byplay with props. But we have tried to indicate the difficulties



of defining pictorialism in acting simply in opposition to realism. Nineteenth-century discourses on acting appealed to concepts of realism quite frequently, and often in ways which did not preclude an emphasis on attitudes and posing, but simply served to reinforce notions of expressiveness, restraint, or decorum that were not clearly specified as such.

We find the calls for realistic or subtle acting in the film industry trade press similarly amorphous. In general with the possible exception of Frank Woods, the trade press does not provide enough detail about what actors were doing on screen, or what they should have been doing, to provide a fruitful definition of realism. 'Albert Goldie's 'Subtlety in Acting', for example, argues that self-conscious acting is bad, but he does not specifically mention poses or attitudes, and it is not clear if posing would necessarily be seen as self-conscious in his terms.<sup>2</sup> In her memoir 'Growing Up with the Movies', Florence Lawrence is somewhat more specific, criticizing an unnamed stage actor who appeared in a feature in the following terms: "The actor I speak of would strike a pose in nearly every other scene which seemed to ask, "Now am I not the handsome lover?" or "Don't you think I'm some hero?"! However, it still is not obvious whether Lawrence is objecting to what she sees as the stage actor's narcissistic showing off, or if any pose, even an expressive one linked to character or situation, is in her view inappropriate for film acting. Humboldt, who tremendously admired Talma's pictorial style of acting, none the less criticized 'mannered' or 'exaggerated' poses which became obvious as such.<sup>4</sup> The problem is not simply how to interpret Lawrence's language here, but more generally that analysis of the film industry trade discourse in terms of an opposition between posed and realistic styles of acting is logically fraught. Because people strike poses in real life, often quite conventional ones, even an avowed advocate of 'realistic' acting might admit some poses on the grounds that they were 'lifelike'. For example, a *Moving Picture World* critic like Goldie was not likely to comment adversely on an actor playing the part of an Italian immigrant who used large, vivid, and fully extended gestures, given that the lack of 'subtlety' would be motivated by ethnic stereotypes. Stanislavsky himself was willing to admit that the actor in *Werther* could strike a pose upon his entrance to Charlotte's cottage provided there was sufficient motivation, that is, supposing he had discovered her corpse. Even a very strict commitment to realism can accommodate poses in certain narrative contexts. Moreover, there does not seem to be a principled way to determine from the reviews or commentary when an actor is being criticized for posing as such, and when the issue of posing is raised simply because a particular attitude was found inappropriate or unconvincing.

But of course we do not have only the reviews. We have at least some of the films, and this evidence suggests that there was posing throughout the years 1908–12 and beyond, even as the trade press praised realistic acting. Pearson's own analyses of films suggest that what she has defined as two distinct codes coexisted, and that well into the 1910s Biograph actors continued to use poses alongside elements such as stage business or the employment of props. For example, she notes that, in the otherwise 'verisimilar' film *His Last Love* (1909), the actors fall into poses during the climactic scene in which the wife discovers her husband's adultery.<sup>3</sup> She finds a similar mixture of the two codes in Henry Walthall's performances in the films *Thou Shalt Not* (1910) and *The Avenging Conscience* (1914), and indeed throughout his

gestural asides to the camera. In the film, Suzanne (Suzanne Grandais) quarrels with Léonce (Perret) over his refusal to purchase an expensive lobster from a local fisherman. He then pretends to go out fishing for lobsters on a stormy night while in fact having made arrangements to buy them. He finally returns home and, with much mugging to the camera, pretends that he is exhausted and suffering from cold after having spent a difficult night at sea. The revelation of his deception leads to a quarrel which is only resolved by the fact that he must rescue the sea-bathing Suzanne by removing an offending crustacean from her posterior. While Perret and Grandais employ vivid and expressive gestures, these often take the form of a rapid 'dialogue', gestures expressing exasperation or reproach exchanged between man and wife during their quarrels. The only attitudes notably held in the film occur during what is for Suzanne (but not the spectator) a potentially tragic moment: during the long night that Suzanne awaits Léonce's return, Grandais poses, first at the window looking out to sea, then in her bedroom, on her knees in prayer. The contrast between the comic and the serious tone is particularly shown up later in this scene when, through a split screen composition, the film composes a triptych showing Grandais on the left, in an attitude of prayer, the sea in the middle of the frame, and Perret on the right, seated comfortably at the movies, and laughing with glee at the Gaumont comedy on the screen.

Note that Perret does not hold a pose in the triptych; this is reserved for Grandais's expression of grief and remorse. It is as if Grandais's acting in *Le Howard* falls out of the comic mode in order to convey Suzanne's state of mind. In general, it seems quite clear that genre was an important factor in determining whether or not the actors choose to adopt attitudes, and the length of time the attitudes were held. Serious drama called for a slower style than comedy, with more pronounced poses and gestures (this was true on the stage as well as film, as Coquelin's discussion of theatrical genres already cited indicates). One tends to find the longest and most marked posing in historical or costume pictures such as *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* (1908) or *Quatre-vingt-treize* (1914–21), or sentimental stories, especially those dealing with dignified, upper-class characters such as *Ma L'amor mio non muore!* (1913). Pearson notes a similar division in her survey of Walthall's films for Biograph, with one of his most 'histrionic' performances being a historical romance, *The Scaled Room* (1909).<sup>7</sup>

But even within serious films, poses become more pronounced at climactic moments, as if the actors are 'saving' them for the big scenes. That is, posing is determined by situation as well as by genre. One of the clearest examples we have seen of this tendency is the Danish film *Klownen* (The Clown, 1917). Joe Higgins (Valdemar Psilander) is the clown in the travelling circus run by Mr and Mrs Bunding in which their daughter Daisy (Gudrun Houlberg) is the bareback rider. Joe and Daisy are in love, and when a major impresario offers Joe a big city contract, he makes it a condition of accepting that the Bundings accompany him. Two years later he is a great success and has married Daisy, but Daisy is courted by Count Henri. One day after his performance, Joe sees Henri kissing Daisy in the mirror in the green room of the theatre. He goes home in despair and finds Daisy there waiting for him. He asks her if she loves the Count; she says yes, so he tells her to go to him. The plot then takes a predictably unhappy turn. After the Count tires of her, Daisy tries to return to Joe, is rebuffed by her father, and commits suicide. Having forgiven Daisy on her deathbed, and mourning her loss, Joe goes downhill himself, and is working in a cheap circus when he meets the Count once again and kills his old rival before expiring.

The scenes of Joe's happy life—the courtship of Daisy, eating dinner with the family, the back-stage preparations for their acts in the travelling circus—are all done at normal tempo



and without marked posing. However, the whole tempo and style of the acting after Joe sees Daisy and the Count kissing in the mirror. The shift is particularly evident in the confrontation between the two at the house which follows Daisy's departure from the theatre (the titles are translations from the Danish ones in the print):

- 1 A salon in Joe's palatial mansion: the anteroom brightly lit rear centre and right, with a closed glass portière at the top of a short flight of steps; a bay window left; a small table, chair, and settee front centre. Houlberg is sitting on the settee, her head on her hands on the table. Psilander enters from the rear right, opens the portière, looks at Houlberg (who does not yet look at him) and stops (Figure 1). He slanders slowly down the steps, then comes forward more quickly, pauses midground right, crosses to stand between the chair and the settee, with his right hand on the chair back. He speaks. Houlberg raises her head with a start, looks up, and leans slowly backwards as he leans forward to her. She apologizes (Figure 2). She leans forward again and looks off right. He leans down and seizes her hand. She rises. He releases her hand and steps back, briefly wringing his hands. Without looking at him, she looks down at the table as he leans back towards her, his fist on the table (Figure 3). He speaks.
- 2 Title: 'Daisy, do you love him?'
- 3 Cut-in to medium shot. Psilander is in profile left, Houlberg's head is raised. She very slowly nods assent, then wipes tears from her eyes. Psilander looks off front centre vacantly in grief. He puts his hand on his forehead (Figure 4).
- 4 As 1. Cut on action. Psilander with hand to forehead, Houlberg looking down left front (Figure 5). Psilander backs unsteadily to stand with his right hand on the chair back. He speaks to her. She turns to him, starts, and looks him full in the face. He comes forward and leans on the table.
- 5 Title: 'Then you have only one thing to do, go to him!'
- 6 As 1. Houlberg turns quickly to face front left and puts her left hand to her heart. She leans over to front right in agony (Figure 6). Psilander comes forward, raises his hands as if to grasp her shoulders but drops them again. He retreats round the settee, his left hand on its back. He points listlessly off left (Figure 7). She tries to face him, raises her arms halfway in appeal, drops them again, turns to face front right, then back again, and passes in front of Psilander and off left slowly. Psilander watches her go, makes a full gesture of appeal off left, raising his hands to head height (Figure 8). He leans back and puts his hands on his head. He turns to front left, pulls his hands down the sides of his face and leans slightly forward (Figure 9).

The plot is nominally advanced in these six shots. Daisy decides to part from Joe, but with regret, and Joe's agony at the loss is reaffirmed. However, much more important story events occur in the prior discovery scene in the green room, or a subsequent scene in which Bundling disowns his daughter, thus preparing for his later dismissal of her after she has repented, and her suicide. In contrast, this scene is almost entirely devoted to extending and elaborating upon the situation put in place by Joe's discovery of the betrayal. The acting does not operate to further the action, but to delay it—to maintain the situation and exploit its emotional resonances, before the next turn of events. Our sense that the pace of the acting slows down here is partly a function of the length of the shots (the six shots comprise 173 feet or 2 minutes, 53 seconds at 16 frames per second), partly one of the tempo of the action, as, for example,

in Psilander's pose at the top of the stairs and the slow movement from the background to the foreground in shot 1. The gestures and poses adopted by the actors tend to be iterative expressions of grief; this also helps to provide a sense of long duration in the scene, since the succession of poses does not provide us with new information about the characters or events, but merely a variation on what we already know. After this scene, the acting never returns to the rapid and unmarked gestures of the early scenes, as the plot shifts to a serious and sentimental register, the acting style changes in accordance with it.

Because posing was keyed to genre and situation, and effectively coexisted with other, more fluid, uses of gesture, it does not make sense in our view to define it theoretically as opposed to realism, or historically as a precursor which was eventually superseded by a realistic acting style. This is not to deny, however, the observation by Pearson, Gunning, Thompson, and others that acting style changes in American films in the period from 1908 to 1912. For us, the questions are somewhat different. How did the actors in the newly forming stock companies in 1907–8—actors largely trained in the theatre—adapt pictorial traditions to film? How did their style change in relation to later developments in film technique?

In this connection it is worth iterating the conditions which impinged on film acting as opposed to the stage in 1908. There was no spoken dialogue, and the whole register of diction and the voice was lost. There was no live audience whose reaction to and understanding of a scene could be gauged. The relatively great figure/camera distance which was the norm in this period meant that the actor was shown full figure but relatively small and on what was usually a small screen. The 'speed' of the one-reel film required that a complex sequence of actions be conveyed in a relatively short span of screen time as compared with any but the most brief one-act play or vaudeville playlet.<sup>9</sup> In response to these conditions, a theatrically trained actor moving into film at this time might well have been motivated to develop a more emphatic style than he had formerly employed on stage. Several points about acting in the 1908–9 Biographs can thus be explained not as a direct carry-over of popular stage traditions, but rather as an attempt to adapt these traditions to the specific requirements of the new medium.

For example, one aspect of acting in the 1908–9 period is what Pearson categorizes as overly emphatic uses of gesture. She argues that actors in the early Biographs often adopt poses with fully extended arms or legs, as in the discussion of Griffith's own acting in *Rescued from an Eagle's Nest* (1908).<sup>10</sup> In one instance, this tendency is evident even in the use of the hand and fingers. Pearson contrasts two proposal scenes in which the principal actor makes his appeal by placing a hand upon his chest, one, *The Voice of the Violin* (1909) with Arthur Johnson, the other, *A Summer Idyll* (1910) with Henry Walthall:

Because Walthall stresses his gestures less than Johnson, the performance does not connote the same degree of theatricality. This becomes clear in comparing the way each actor places his hands on his chest. Johnson uses both hands with the palms flattened, to modern eyes parodying a lover declaring himself, as the pose absolutely reeks of theatricality. Walthall places one hand lightly on his chest, the palm slightly raised and fingers slightly cupped. Though Walthall employs a conventional gesture, the lack of emphasis reduces the deliberate self-consciousness of the histrionic code.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> While we would agree with Pearson that actors often use fully extended limbs during 1908–9, we would dispute her claim that this kind of posing is simply carried over from stage acting.



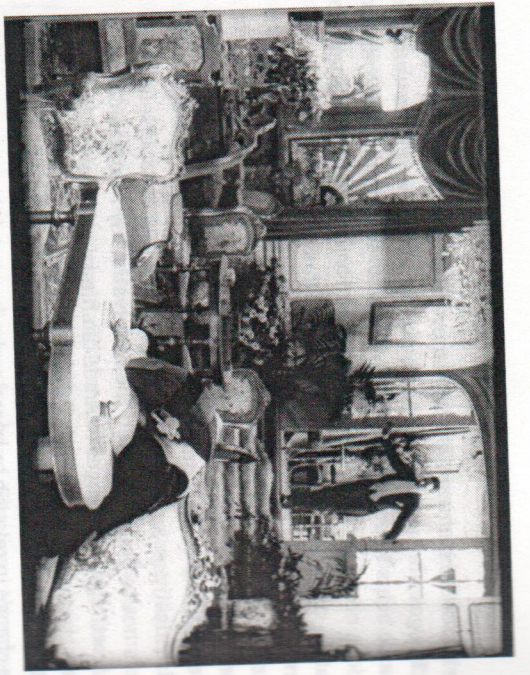


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 4



Figure 5







Figure 7



Figure 8

styles in the theatre (although, of course, bad actors were everywhere). The fully outstretched hand position adopted by Arthur Johnson in this example would have been anathema to most nineteenth-century teachers of acting. What she characterizes as the 'slow and graceful' movements typical of Walthall's performance in *A Summer Idyll* are much closer to the way in which we understand the elements of pictorial style in the theatre.<sup>12</sup>

As we have noted, the late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century acting manuals repeatedly stress the importance of grace and good bearing; they also specifically recommend against fully extended limbs. For example, in his lesson on hand position, Jelgerhuis argues that the fingers should always be gracefully curved, to give 'play and contrast' to their position. He cautions against either one of two extremes:

I used to know a very good speaker on the Stage, who out of unthinking habit, always appeared with crooked fingers; what a wretched habit! I hope, that this example will be enough, to draw your attention to it, so that you will always avoid it.—Yet don't think, Dear Students! that the hand hanging down with straight fingers can wholly redress this, no, although better than with crooked fingers. . . . For the hanging arm, and the free and unforced hand, there must be play and contrast in the posture of the fingers, to make it look elegant, to give it looseness, freedom and decorum.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, he characterizes a fully extended arm as 'without grace, stretched! out like a pole' and cautions against movements involving both hands and arms together unless 'one adopts them purposely, in order to become ridiculous'.<sup>14</sup> Riccoboni also tells students to avoid having both arms equally extended, and raising them to the same height. He cites a 'well enough known rule' that the hand should not be raised above the eye, adding the caveat that 'when a violent passion carries him away, the Actor can forget all the rules; he can move with despatch, and lift his arms even above his head'.<sup>15</sup> Riccoboni's remarks suggest that actors could use fully extended, and thus relatively emphatic gestures, but only sparingly, and in accordance with extreme situations. Recall that Yeats makes just such an analysis of Édouard de Max's performance in *Piñère*, in which he apparently saved his biggest gesture for the climax of the scene: 'Through one long scene De Max, who was quite as fine, never lifted his hands above his elbow, it was only when the emotion came to its climax that he raised it to his breast.' Lessing's remark already cited about wild or baroque gesture also suggests the importance of modulating such gestures in a sequence; he argued that they could be made acceptable if the actor prepared for them and finally resolved them into more harmonious poses.

The sequence already discussed from *Kloven* provides a good example of the way in which emphatic gesture could be controlled through the modulation of poses. The actors adopt a series of attitudes expressing grief: These are 'smaller' in shot 1, with Psilander posing far in the background, or, after he has come forward, leaning on a chair or table for support, with Houlberg turning away from him. The scale changes in shot 3, a medium shot, so that facial expressions can be emphasized with very little movement on the part of the actors, as in Houlberg's small nod of her head in affirmation to the question whether or not she loves the Count. The scene returns to the long-shot framing and builds to the largest gestures in shot 6: Houlberg's attitude in which she puts her hand to her heart and leans her body away from Psilander to the right to express her grief, and Psilander's attitude, in the same shot after her exit, in which he extends his arms and raises his hands to head height, and then later, when he pulls his hands down the sides of his face (Figures 6, 8 and 9).



In sum, the extended gestures of the Biograph actors described by Pearson were not the inevitable result of stage practices, but particular applications of them—in some cases without enough care to prevent clumsy postures, and in others without the calculation and timing by which experienced stage actors built up to 'big' or pronounced poses. Aside from inexperience or incompetence, we attribute this kind of posing to difficulties already adduced in the period before 1912—particularly problems of coping with the small scale of the actor's image in the typical long-shot framings, and the effort to make a story clear in a restricted amount of time to an audience that the actor could not play to nor get reassurance from directly.

Clearly then, another constraint on actors in this early period was the demand for a swift pace. Pearson discusses this, as does the perceptive Frank Woods in a 1910 'Spectator's' column in which he asserts that 'the most marked change that has taken place in the style of picture acting in the last year or two has been in the matter of tempo' and praises Biograph acting for the 'deliberation and repose' in its recent films.<sup>16</sup> Again, the fast tempo Woods disapproves of does not seem to be a direct carry-over from the theatre, since all the evidence we have seen about the length of poses there suggests that they were held for much longer than they ever were in film. In the same column, Woods attributes the emphasis on speed to the novelty of the moving picture itself: 'Everything had to be on the jump. The more action that could be crowded into each foot of film the more perfect the picture was supposed to be.' The limitation of length in the one-reel film may also have contributed to the relatively swift pace of film acting. This is how we would interpret Florence Lawrence's recollection about her differences with Griffith over acting tempo:

What seemed to annoy us 'Biographers' very much and hold us back from achieving greater artistic success was the speed and rapidity with which we had to work before the camera. Mr. Griffith always answered our complaint by stating that the exchanges and exhibitors who bought our pictures wanted action, and insisted that they get plenty of it for their money. 'The exhibitors don't want illustrated song slides,' Mr. Griffith once said to us. So we made our work quick and snappy, crowding as much story in a thousand foot picture as is now portrayed in five thousand feet of film. Several pictures which we produced in three hundred feet have since been reproduced in one thousand feet. There was no chance for slow or 'stage' acting. The moment we started to do a bit of acting in the proper tempo we would be startled by the cry of the director: 'Faster! Faster! For God's sake hurry up! We must do the scene in forty feet.'<sup>17</sup>

The problem then, was not simply that the exhibitors wanted 'action' in every foot, but that such a rapid pace was considered necessary if all the relevant action was to be conveyed in the requisite length.

Perhaps as actors and directors such as Griffith mastered the one-reel form, that is by the date of Woods's column in 1910, it had become possible to 'slow down' to some degree. Note, however, that six months before he praises the deliberation and repose of Biograph actors, Frank Woods criticizes the final scene of the same company's *All on Account of the Milk* (1910) with the comment: 'The last scene appears to degenerate into farce, and to be acted hastily and with too little dramatic effect, due, perhaps, to the lack of film space.'<sup>18</sup> In general he praises the acting in the film (by Mary Pickford, Arthur Johnson, Mack Sennett, and Blanche

were forced to rush the last scene to ensure that the film was the proper length. Even if Woods is wrong in his guess about what happened at the end of this specific film, the comment suggests that he was aware of the lack of 'space' on the reel as a problem for actors. We would argue that it continued to be, and, as compared to the early feature, actors in the one-reel film were given many fewer opportunities to dwell on situations, to hold poses or develop elaborate sequences of them. A three-minute sequence of the sort described in *Klownen*, in which almost nothing happens at the level of the plot, would be extremely difficult to accommodate within a sixteen-minute movie.

Our attempt to search out the most accomplished and technically elaborated examples of pictorial styles has thus led us to focus primarily on the early feature film. But at the same time this periodization introduces a new limitation or constraint on pictorial acting, since by this point the editing options open to filmmakers begin to interfere with the actor's performance in ways that would not have been imaginable in the theatre. As Tom Gunning has argued in relation to the example of *After Many Years* already cited, editing can potentially disrupt and reconfigure the actor's pose and gesture. Cross-cutting of the kind in *After Many Years*, and, later, the kinds of scene dissection which Gunning discusses in relation to *The Lady and the Mouse* (1913), effectively displace some of the actor's traditional functions, providing filmmakers with other means of directing the spectator's attention within a space, regulating the pace of a scene, expressing emotion, and underscoring dramatic situations.<sup>19</sup> This possibility is evident as well in the scene of Little Eva's death in the World version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which the various expressions of grief on the part of the actors are directed and controlled by the editing pattern which alternates between the bedroom and the various spaces outside it. In contrast, in the theatre this regulation of the spectator's attention would have been structured largely through the acting of the ensemble, through the actors taking turns, the gesture of one setting off or leading to the gesture of another in what Riccoboni compared to 'musicians who sing a piece in several parts'. Editing could thus at least partially fulfil functions which had previously been fulfilled by the actor(s) through the generation of pictorial effects. This is not to say that film editing could not coexist with posing and pictorial styles; but it is to say that a highly edited film could more easily support bad pictorial acting, or non-acting, or a more reduced, i.e. less emphatic, style.

Pearson argues the latter case. In a careful comparison of *After Many Years* (1908) with *Enoch Arden*, she shows how the later version of the same story requires fewer gestures, and less extended ones, because *Enoch Arden* can rely on more cross-cutting and glance/object editing to convey important information about story events and character states.<sup>20</sup> But moving away from the example of the Griffith Biographs, we would also suggest that highly edited films could help to accommodate very bad, or at least inexperienced, acting.

Indeed, while Biograph films are usually praised by reviewers in the trade press when they are discussing acting specifically, discussions of Biograph's fast-paced editing usually elicited complaints about its effect on acting style. One review of *A Girl's Stratagem* (1913) notes 'The action is held in pretty closely to its center of interest, and the scene-making searchlight straps back and forth from one actor to another and seems to pick out the different elements of the situation almost simultaneously.' This is a speedy method and makes the picture, as a whole, clear at the expense, now and then, of the acting. 'The scenes change so fast that the players now and then seem all arms and hands.'<sup>21</sup> And from a review of *The Hero of Little Italy* (1913): 'There is a good story in this picture and the producer has made it exciting. As it approaches its climax, the scenes, flashed back and forth, keep the action concrete and almost



breathless. But this playing for the thrill is not the best use of the motion picture camera: for in such there is almost no individual acting—everything goes to situation, nothing to character.<sup>22</sup> Epes Winthrop Sargent reports on Dr Stockton's experiment in 1912 counting the scenes in over twenty one-reel and split-reel films by various manufacturers, with most companies having what he considered high cutting rates (the one Biograph on the list is the fastest cut). Sargent quotes Stockton's opinion of this tendency: "It looks very much as if Edison and the foreigners were the only ones not bitten by the lightning bug, with the result that his releases are, to my mind, the only ones that are really drama. The others have lots of action, but no acting and no chance for any."<sup>23</sup> The point is that not only did editing permit the actor to do "less" in terms of posing and gesture, but the pace of a highly edited film required it.

## Notes

- 1 Frank Woods consistently complained about actors looking at the camera, and in one of his columns he specifically objects to posing in the sense of standing or speaking to the camera, and thereby acknowledging its presence. See Frank Woods, "Spectator's Comments," *New York Dramatic Mirror* 67, no. 1736 (27 March 1912): 24.
- 2 Albert Goldie, "Subtlety in Acting," *New York Dramatic Mirror* 68, no. 1769 (13 November 1912): 4; and for a confused account of whether or not film acting should be emphatic see Hanford C. Judson, "What Gets Over," *Moving Picture World* 8, no. 15 (15 April 1911): 816.
- 3 Florence Lawrence in collaboration with Monte M. Katterjohn, "Growing Up with the Movies," *Photoplay* 7, no. 2 (January 1915): 103.
- 4 William Von Humboldt, "Über die gegenwärtige Französische tragische Bühne: Aus Briefen," *Propyläen* 3, no. 1 (1800): 396.
- 5 Roberta Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biography Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 62.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 110–11 and 119.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 105.
- 8 Charles Musser, "The Changing Status of the Film Actor," in *Before Hollywood: Turn-of-the-Century American Film* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1987), 57–62, gives 1907–08 as the date of the formation of the stock companies, a time when the demand for story films had increased to the point that it was no longer practicable for the major producers to hire actors only on a per-day basis. Lawrence, "Growing Up," 96, refers to the formation of the stock company Biograph in 1908. Many in the Biograph stock company had stage experience; see Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, 83–4, on Griffith making the rounds of the theatrical agencies. The extent to which theatrically trained actors predominated in other motion-picture stock companies is indicated by the biographies of members of the Vitagraph stock company in Anthony Slide, *The Big V: A History of the Vitagraph Company*, rev. edn. (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 134–55.
- 9 On the latter two conditions see Kristin Thompson in David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), 189–92.
- 10 Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures* 77 (on the unchecked historic code with fully extended gestures as typical of "melodramatic" acting), and 79–81 (on Griffith's acting as an example of this style), and 2 (for another example of these sorts of fully extended gestures).
- 11 *Ibid.*, 40–1.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 13 Johannes Jøelgerhuis, *Theoretische Lessen over de Gesticulatie en Mimiek: Gegeven aan de Kweekelingen van het Fonds ter Opleiding van Tooneel-Kunstenaars aan den Stads Schouwburg te Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: P.M. Warnars, 1827; repr. Uitgeverij Adopt M. Hakker, 1970), 97–8; cit. Dene Barnett, *The Art of Gesture: The Practices and Principles of 18th Century Acting* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987), 98.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 89 and 87; cit. Dene Barnett, "The Performance Practice of Acting: The Eighteenth Century, Part III: The Arms," *Theatre Research International* 5, no. 1 (1977): iii, 82–3. In *The Art of Gesture*, iii, 132, Barnett suggests that this remains a problem for performers today: "One of the worst (and most common) examples of the lack of pictorial contrast is to have both hands raised to the same height and equally extended; this always looks gauche and lacking in grace and proportion."
- 15 Francois Riccoboni, *L'Art du Theatre, suivi d'une lettre de M. Riccoboni fils a M\*\*\* au sujet d'art du theatre* (Paris: Simon et Giffart, 1750; repr. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1971), 13–14; cit. Barnett, "Performance Practice," iii, 84. For similar comments about the possibility of extending gesture, and raising the arms above the height of the eyes in moments of passion, see Barnett, *Art of Gesture*, 107–8.
- 16 Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, 27, seems to assume that "melodramatic" acting on the stage as well as the "unchecked histrionic code" employed by Biograph actors was fast-paced; see also 80 and 87 on Griffith's preference for "fast acting." Frank Woods's remarks appear in his column "Spectator's Comments," *New York Dramatic Mirror* 63, no. 1641 (4 June 1910): 16; repr. in George Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Cinematic Writings* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1966), 84.
- 17 Lawrence and Katterjohn, "Growing Up," 107. Note that Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, 87, has abridged this quotation to remove the reference to the thousand-foot reel and the comparison with the feature film. She also interprets this quotation differently, assuming that Griffith's preference for "fast" acting derived from the fact that he had still not abandoned habits acquired in the theatre and his preference for the "histrionic" code. We think the full quotation amply demonstrates the specific cinematic need for speed in this period, i.e. that scenes had to be completed within the requisite number of feet given the limitation of the one-reel film.
- 18 Frank Woods, "Reviews of Licensed Films . . . All on Account of the Milk," *New York Dramatic Mirror* 63, no. 1622 (22 January 1910): 17; repr. in Anthony Slide (ed.), *Selected Film Criticism 1896–1911* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1982), 4–5. Woods's review of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Seig, 1910), "Reviews of Licensed Films," *New York Dramatic Mirror* 64, no. 5177 (30 November 1910): 30, makes a similar point: "The part of Falstaff was adequately taken, although it suffered like all the rest from the necessity of hastening the action to make it fit into the allotted time."
- 19 Tom Gunning, D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: *The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 113–14 and 262–70.
- 20 Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, 63–74.
- 21 "Comments on the Films, . . . A Girl's Strategy," *Moving Picture World*, 15, no. 12 (22 March 1913): 1219; repr. in Pratt, *Spellbound in Darkness*, 104.



22 "Comments on the Films . . . *The Hero of Little Italy*," *Moving Picture World* 16, no. 3 (19 April 1913): 279; repr. in Pratt, 105.

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## Crafting Film Performances

### Acting in the Hollywood Studio Era

CYNTHIA BARON

In the 1930s and 1940s, studio publicity focused the public's attention on stars' personalities rather than their craftsmanship. In promotional campaigns for specific pictures and behind-the-scene bios of individual stars, audiences were told that Hollywood actors were natural actors whose unique qualities were captured by the camera. That image—of Hollywood actors playing themselves—might in some circumstances be entirely accurate. Clearly there was little craftsmanship involved in cases where inexperienced actors simply memorized their lines and hit their marks, or, to portray emotional intensity, worked themselves into agitated states by remembering traumatic experiences. Similarly, it makes no sense to discuss stars' agency and expertise in cases where established, experienced actors chose not to prepare for parts, and instead relied on habit, guidance from directors, and support from fellow actors.

Cases such as these, however, need not be taken as representative. In marked contrast to the view that film performances were produced with no effort expended by actors themselves, practitioners of the period consistently argue that training, labour, and practical craft experience allowed actors and their collaborators to create performances and respond to the specific challenges of Hollywood studio productions in the 1930s and 1940s. Put most broadly, professionals working in Hollywood during this period seem to have found ways to integrate methods developed in American silent film with principles formulated by individuals working in American theatre. Hollywood workers whose focus was dramatic performance appear to have derived strategies based on their understanding of Moscow Art Theatre productions and Stanislavsky's System, or to have found similar solutions to shared problems of 'modern' performance.

Throughout the period, the disparate demands of specific characters, narratives, and genres required actors and their collaborators to use an eclectic collection of methods borrowed from dance, modelling, vaudeville, and the legit stage. Rather than there being a single method, or even style of acting, actors' methods and performance styles reflected the demands of each screenplay. For example, a Marx brothers' comedy like *A Night at the Opera* (1935) required methods of preparation and performance styles that were very different from those built into John Ford's expressionistic drama *The Informer* (1935). Similarly, the screwball comedy *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) would necessarily lead an actor like Cary Grant to acting methods and performance styles quite different from those called for by Clifford Odets' low-lit melodrama *None but the Lonely Heart* (1944).



Recognizing that descriptions of methods and styles of acting cannot and need not apply to any and all film performances of the period, in the discussion that follows I shall consider points of contact that do exist in accounts that address the basic demands of film performance, for there is a remarkable consistency in acting professionals' views on relationships between stage and screen acting. I shall also examine repeated patterns in practitioners' observations on methods for approaching and executing performances in character-driven narratives, for in material concerning dramatic performances or character-based comedic performances a few central points consistently emerge. Professionals of the period believed that actors' minds and bodies formed a unified, organic whole, and from that position continually argue for the value of training body and voice. Practitioners assumed that an actor (not the director) was responsible for studying the script to create a character with a complete life history, and they consistently argue that the script must serve as the blueprint for building characters. Professionals believed that only after exhaustive preparation could an actor integrate direction and accommodate the unique demands of film production, rather than repeatedly discuss the need for dispassionate execution of performance. In short, they repeatedly discuss the need for dispassionate execution of performance, rather than presenting a single method or theory of acting. Practitioners describe a collection of assumptions, beliefs, strategies, and pragmatic guidelines for training the actor's instrument, developing characterizations, representing characters, and accommodating the demands of sound cinema.

### Production context and the transition to sound

While methods for creating film performances became increasingly formalized and well articulated in the years following the transition to sound, the mystery or perhaps confusion about what was actually involved in producing film performances seems to have been heightened by production conventions that accompanied that transition. No longer were directors and directors rehearsing on stages next to productions in progress. No longer were directors guiding actors through performances with verbal instructions and/or the support of musical accompaniment to set the mood. As a consequence of production demands that developed in the years between 1926 and 1934, film performances were the result of ever-increasing levels of division of labour. Most pointedly, the people who developed acting talent worked with actors during rehearsals were often not the same people who worked with actors on the set. Beginning in the 1930s, the studios hired *dialogue coaches* or *dialogue directors* to work with actors on specific parts and dialogue scenes. The studios also brought *drama coaches* to train young contract players and prepare even experienced actors for screen tests and actual performances. In the years following the transition to sound, these acting experts became an integral – but consistently hidden – part of the process of producing film performances.

The transition to sound not only led to changes in actual production processes and the creation of new positions. Sound cinema also provided work for actors and directors who would draw on their sometimes extensive experience in theatrical stock companies and Broadway productions. Industry observers of the period saw the migration of acting talent from Broadway to Hollywood as highly significant. One finds that by 1929, articles in the *New York Times* are often discussing the central role theatre actors had played in the casts of 'audible

perhaps summarizes the received wisdom of the day in arguing that the 'traditional actor, the stage actor 'schooled in the method of bringing life, emotions, and humor directly to the audience' looked to be the dominant type of actor in theatre and the Hollywood sound film.<sup>1</sup>

The transition to sound made stage experience a valuable commodity, and opened the floodgates to scores of theatrically trained actors. It also indirectly and incrementally led to new venues and methods for actor training, for Hollywood's transition to sound not only made stage training increasingly important, it also made securing that experience increasingly difficult. In the teens and twenties, actors had learned their craft through apprenticeships in film and/or theatre, but the arrival of sound reduced actors' opportunities for on-the-job training, and in particular training in theatrical venues. Participating in a process shaped by multiple economic and industrial forces, Hollywood sound cinema contributed to the decline of vaudeville, Broadway, and theatrical stock companies by cutting into stage productions' already reduced audiences. Exemplifying the trend of all American theatre, the number of productions mounted on Broadway dropped from 300 in the 1928/1929 season to 80 productions ten years later.

As the 1930s progressed, film executives openly discussed the fact that traditional training grounds for Hollywood actors had been raided to breaking point. The steady decline in the number of stage productions forced the studios to search for other ways of developing and maintaining acting talent. They began to hire acting experts and establish actor training programmes on the lots. The first dialogue directors and drama coaches were brought into the system in 1933, when Paramount hired veteran stage producer/director Lillian Albertson as a dialogue coach, and, as head of the talent department, Phyllis Loughton, who had stage managed for Norman Bel Geddes and the Jesse Bonstelle stock company. In 1935, Florence Enright, a founding member of the prestigious Theatre Guild in New York, became a drama coach at Universal, and the next year moved to Twentieth Century Fox. In 1936, Lillian Burns, an actress who learned her craft with the Belasco Company and had been a member of the Dallas Little Theatre, was put in charge of MGM's drama department. In 1938, Warner Bros hired Sophie Rosenstein to design their actor training programme. Rosenstein came to Warner Bros with ten years of experience as a drama teacher at the University of Washington. As a child she had studied with Josephine Dillon, yet another figure who in the studio years joined the ranks of film acting teachers. In the mid to late 1930s, drama schools were established throughout Hollywood and by 1939 all of the major studios had actor training programmes.

In addition to opening drama schools on the lots, the studios developed an increasingly close relationship with established institutions such as the American Academy of Dramatic Art and the Pasadena Playhouse, as well as drama schools set up by Moscow Art Theatre expatriate Maria Ouspenskaya and theatre companies such as the Actors' Laboratory. The Academy of Dramatic Art, founded in 1884, was the oldest acting school in America, and from its inception had been guided by the philosophy that 'imitative methods' of coaching must be replaced by what Academy directors such as Charles Lehlinger believed were methods of scientific training. Courses in acting were first offered by the Pasadena Playhouse in 1928. The two-year programme that emerged from those first classes provided training in what Playhouse founder Gilmor Brown and his colleagues believed were the principles of 'modern stagecraft' that guided developments at the Moscow Art Theatre and the 'little theatre' movement in America. An interest in providing scientific, modern, and systematic methods for developing acting skills and specific performances also informed the actor



training programs at the other noteworthy drama schools in Hollywood. Maria Ouspenskaya's School of Dramatic Art, founded in New York in 1929 and moved to Hollywood in 1940, offered a two-year programme which, like other programmes of the period, required actors to spend the first year working almost entirely on developing the actor's instrument. The Actors' Laboratory – established in 1941 by former members of the Group Theatre such as Morris Carnovsky, Roman Bohnen, J. Edward Bromberg, and Phoebe Brand – provided actor training for a collection of contract players from RKO, Twentieth Century Fox, and Universal throughout the 1940s. The two-year programme they developed integrated courses in diction, body movement, improvisation, and lifestyle, and was shaped by a philosophy Lab members referred to as a 'conscious approach to acting'.

The emerging importance of formal training for film actors was accompanied by increasingly systematic methods for developing skills and specific performances. Acting teachers working in Hollywood seem to have played a significant role in articulating and formalizing the period's methods of acting, for there is a collection of manuals authored by individuals who were integral to the network of actor training programmes in Hollywood. For example, *Modern Acting: A Manual* (1936), co-authored by Sophie Rosenstein, became a basic primer for Rosenstein's students in the drama school at Warner Bros. and also for contract players at Universal-International after Rosenstein became head of their talent development programme in 1949. *General Principles of Play Direction* (1936) by Gilmor Brown was a text for actors and directors at the Pasadena Playhouse, which for two decades served as a training ground and showcase for scores of film actors, and stage actors making the transition to film. In 1940, freelance acting teacher Josephine Dillon, who was Clark Gable's first acting teacher and later his first wife, published *Modern Acting: A Guide for Stage, Screen and Radio*. One finds Dillon's exhaustively detailed textbook consistently listed as a reference for courses offered at the Pasadena Playhouse and the Actors' Laboratory. In 1947, Lillian Albertson summarized the methods she had been presenting to contract players at Paramount and later at RKO in a manual entitled *Motion Picture Acting*, which opens with endorsements from actors Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant, journalist Adela Rogers St Johns, RKO casting director Ben Piazza, director Leo McCarey, and producer Jesse Lasky.

At this stage of research, it is not possible to determine how widely these manuals were studied. There is evidence, however, that following the transition to sound, acting experts became a recognized part of the Hollywood system. Trade papers of the period refer to the Actors' Lab as the best independent drama school in the country. Files from the Pasadena Playhouse show that a collection of film executives consistently secured casting advice from Playhouse directors, and openly admitted to using the Playhouse as a feeder school. Newspapers and archival records reveal that in 1940 Hedda Hopper asked drama coach Maria Ouspenskaya to write a guest column in which Ouspenskaya described the two-year programme offered by her drama school. A year later, the recognized role of acting experts, and of Ouspenskaya's unique contributions, is suggested in a Louella Parsons' column where Parsons describes Ouspenskaya as 'one of the finest coaches in the business':

### Stage and screen: quantitative adjustments

of stage and screen acting. In film acting manuals from the early 1920s, practitioners consistently argue that 'screen acting had become an art in itself [and that] it is not acting as we understand the word from what we see on the stage'.<sup>2</sup> Yet professionals working in Hollywood after the coming of sound no longer saw acting on stage as fundamentally different from acting on screen. Finding quantitative rather than qualitative distinctions in this later period, they discuss the need to adjust gestures and vocal delivery when moving from one venue to the other, and the fact that film acting required more training, experience, and concentration.

The period's changed perspective on screen acting is suggested by the fact that while practitioners in the early 1920s held conflicting views about the value of training in drama schools and theatrical productions, by the mid to late 1930s Hollywood professionals seem to have developed a definite consensus that training in dramatic schools and on the stage was not only valuable, but essential training for film actors. Training in tone production and diction were seen as important for work on both stage and screen. Training to create and maintain a body flexible enough to represent different types of characters was seen as a basic requirement of both stage and screen acting. Doing exercises to develop one's sensibilities, emotional recall ability, and skill in observation and concentration were considered part of any actor's work. The labour of building a character by analysing the script as a whole, creating a backstory for the character, and breaking down each scene to discover its purpose and the character's task, was seen as central to an actor's preparation for performances on both stage and screen.

In an article in *Theatre Arts*, American Academy of Dramatic Art graduate Hume Cronyn argues that 'the difference between acting for the screen and acting for the stage is negligible and the latter is, despite the exceptions, the best possible training for the former'.<sup>3</sup> He explains that the difference is negligible because in film, the actor's 'business, as in theatre, remains with the character he is to play and this will require his full powers of concentration'.<sup>4</sup> In another article in *Theatre Arts*, Bette Davis demystifies the stage/screen opposition by explaining that acting in theatre and film does not require actors to approach their characters differently, but that in preparation and performance certain adjustments need to be made. She writes that while 'it is axiomatic that a screen actor works in a medium that has its own, its special technical demands . . . this is not a qualitative distinction; it is merely quantitative'.<sup>5</sup> Davis explains the difference is merely quantitative because 'the art itself is not different . . . there does not exist one kind of acting for the stage, another for the films'.<sup>6</sup> Instead, stage and screen actors all 'work with the same tools. Our craft requires slight modification in them, that is all'.<sup>7</sup>

Practitioners of the period emphasize the fundamental bond between acting on stage and screen, and at the same time acknowledge that film practice in the studio era had its own technical demands. One finds actors consistently discussing the adjustments actors made when moving from one venue to another. They explain that 'acting in the movies [is] the same as acting anywhere [and that] while they use different projection, [they] use the same energy [because the transition is] like going from a big to a small theatre'.<sup>8</sup> Actors who came to film from theatre had to unlearn the practice of presenting large gestures on the stage, and discovered instead that 'shades of feeling could be made intimately visible by minute contractions of a muscle'.<sup>9</sup>

Many theatre actors came to enjoy working in film precisely because it allowed them to use small pieces of business to convey meaning. As Bette Davis explains, 'while the process



of acting is basically the same [on stage and screen], the screen is a fantastic medium for the reality of little things'.<sup>10</sup> Cronyn echoes that point in saying that

it may take a little time and some guidance for the stage actor to become accustomed to the degree of projection which will be most effective on the screen, but the technique of film acting is no unique or mystic formula.<sup>11</sup>

He explains that in film

a whole new range of expression is opened to the actor. He can register with a whisper, a glance, a contraction of a muscle, in a manner that would be lost on stage. The camera will often reflect what a man thinks, without the degree of demonstration required in the theatre.<sup>12</sup>

These observations are repeated throughout materials from the period, for practitioners found that a film actor's new range of expression did not appear 'naturally' by virtue of being photographed, but instead had to emerge under his or her conscious control.

Working in a medium that magnified everything, actors and their collaborators clearly articulated the specific demands of acting in film. One finds acting experts explicitly stating that 'the fundamental difference between acting on the stage and the screen [was] the size of the actor from the viewpoint of the audience'.<sup>13</sup> Acting teacher Josephine Dillon explains that because images projected on the screen were sometimes 30 feet high, gestures and expressions would be 'huge and ridiculous if exaggerated'... even if they [were performed only] as large as sometimes used in real life'.<sup>14</sup> Discussing the effect of performances being framed in close-up and projected on large screens, MGM drama coach Lillian Burns explains that actors coming to film from theatre had

[to learn] projection from the eyes instead of just the voice [for] in motion pictures there is a camera, what I have termed a 'truth machine'. You cannot say 'dog' and think 'cat' because 'meow' will come out if you do.<sup>15</sup>

The magnification of actors' expressions and gestures led acting experts to formalize methods for creating film performances devoid of exaggerated, distracting, meaningless, and confusing movement. In her analysis of 'thought conversation', Josephine Dillon clarifies Burns's observation that the camera is a truth machine. Dillon explains that

the expressions of the eyes... represent the emotions of the part played and so the actor should, in studying the part, improvise the probable mental conversations of the person portrayed, and memorize them as carefully as the written dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

Even more specifically, Dillon points out that

the dialogue ascribed to the persons in the play conveys what the other people in the play are to believe [while] the expressions in the eyes and the body show to the audience what the character in the play is actually feeling and thinking.<sup>17</sup>

Dillon's advice to use internal dialogue to colour expression in actors' eyes suggests the integral points of contact between stage and screen acting in this period, for the method is in fact an extension of practices developed for performances in 'modern' theatre. As Rosenstein and her colleagues explain in *Modern Acting: A Manual*, actors should give themselves 'positive silent lines [that are] as true and absorbing as any lines' spoken on stage.<sup>18</sup> The authors point out that it will be easier for the actor 'to guarantee his attention in [a] particular scene if he works out a suitable thought pattern of definite reactions which he undergoes as religiously as he adheres to the written dialogue the author has given him'.<sup>19</sup> Rosenstein and her colleagues refer to the thought pattern developed for each and every scene as 'silent thinking'.<sup>20</sup>

Echoing observations about *quantitative adjustments* made for performing on camera, practitioners of the period consistently discuss shooting out of sequence, and having little or no rehearsal on the set in terms of adjustments to established (theatrical) methods. That is, even given the logistics of Hollywood film production, the transition to sound seems to have led professionals to minimize distinctions between methods for approaching stage and screen performance. With the addition of filmed 'dialogue scenes', at least some practitioners seem to have considered various methods of preparation for film performances as modifications of processes involved in theatrical rehearsals. Actor Hume Cronyn explains that when he worked in his first film 'it became obvious that in theatre terms there was to be practically no rehearsal'.<sup>21</sup> Understanding that, Cronyn responded like other experienced actors working in Hollywood and took the task of preparation on himself. He studied his script, chose his wardrobe, studied his character's relationship to other characters in the screenplay, developed some detailed ideas on [his] own character's background and his action throughout the story'.<sup>22</sup> He used an extension of theatre's dress rehearsal routine by choosing his character's house in the neighbourhood they were shooting, his character's place of work, and so on. He kept a notebook that gave him 'a point of reference... to return to, and recheck, character fundamentals'.<sup>23</sup> Cronyn explains that a film actor's individual preparation makes it possible to 'step before the camera with a clear and logical plan of what you would like to do and how you would like to do it'.<sup>24</sup>

Repeating points made by theatrically trained actors like Cronyn, MGM drama coach Lillian Burns describes the work of film professionals who came to the set fully prepared, able to incorporate directors' suggestions precisely because they had done their homework and could create characters on their own. In an interview with columnist Gladys Hall, Burns explains that little rehearsal time on the set meant more, not less, labour for film actors. Burns argues that while 'they say it's so easy [to act in film] you don't go over and over it [on the set] as you do on stage'.<sup>25</sup> Burns sees overcoming the problem of working without rehearsal and shooting out of sequence as one that required skill, rather than reliance on a larger-than-life personality. Noting that she gets 'angry when people say [film acting] isn't as difficult as the stage', Burns points to the example of Greer Garson, who in playing a scene in *Madame Curie* 'sat absolutely quiet, didn't talk for ten minutes, then walked to a drape and broke down and sobbed'. Burns remarks, 'to walk into that on a cold morning, that takes doing'.<sup>26</sup>

Coming from Burns, the insight and the compliment is worth noting, for before Burns came to MGM in 1936, there had been classes in diction, body movement, and so on, but 'working through production [helping to cast and rehearse actors] had never been done quite the way [she] did it'.<sup>27</sup> Burns not only worked with executives on hiring and casting, she also worked with, and sometimes around, studio directors. She would work privately with leading



actors because, as MGM executive Al Tresecony explains, she could 'get performances out of actors that even surprised them'.<sup>28</sup> Tresecony notes that Burns not only prepared 'most of our stars for their specific roles . . . often she would be asked by the heads of the other studios to work with their stars'.<sup>29</sup> Respected because of her talent and feared because she leveled with everyone,<sup>30</sup> like other dialogue directors and drama coaches of the period, Lillian Burns played a pivotal role in the production of film performances in the 1930s and 1940s.

### Building a dramatic character

For the people whose job it was to produce performances, the script served as a blueprint that was studied to ensure that actors arrived on the set prepared to deliver their performances. Bette Davis explains that 'without scripts none of us can work. It's the beginning of the work'.<sup>31</sup> Hume Cronyn points out that the actor's first task is to establish the facts, and he remarks, 'it's surprising how much information is contained in the text; how many questions are answered by careful re-reading'.<sup>32</sup> He argues that 'your own creative work should be based on the fact and suggestion supplied by the author, rather than on independent fancy'.<sup>33</sup> Echoing the actors' observations, Lillian Burns explains: 'the writer – that's the seed'.<sup>34</sup> Working with Burns, one learned that after studying the script, actors begin to give their characters life by 'establishing a complete person, a complete life', for example, where the character went to school, what he or she liked to wear, what that character would do in a certain circumstance because of his or her relationships with parents, brothers, and sisters, and so on.<sup>35</sup> Janet Leigh recalls Burns taught her that

you give that person a real entity, so that wherever you happen to start the story you are coming from somewhere; you know where this person's been, why this person reacts the way she does. Because it may not be your way of reacting, but it would be the character's.<sup>36</sup>

Cronyn echoes her point. He explains that an actor's own responses are immaterial, and that actors must always ask, 'if I were *this kind of person* in this situation, what would I do? How would I feel, think, behave, react, etc.?'<sup>37</sup>

In her 1947 acting manual, drama coach Lillian Albertson also presents the script as the starting point for the production of film performances. Albertson argues, in no uncertain terms, that '*before performance comes interpretation*'. By that, I mean the strictly intellectual analysis of a role.<sup>38</sup> In a strictly intellectual analysis, actors use the script to determine the character's background, asking 'what made this person feel the way he or she does, and do the things they do?'<sup>39</sup> Albertson points out that 'if there is not enough in the dialogue to provide you with all the motives animating them, *make up stories about them* so that they seem alive to you'.<sup>40</sup> For actors in the studio era, the practice of filling in characters' backgrounds was part of the process of slowly and methodically entering into the world of the characters. That process required actors to be touched by the characters emotionally. Actors' Laboratory member Morris Carnovsky explains that great parts 'give us "thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" . . . they are great images [that actors] learn to use and to be shaken [by]'.<sup>41</sup>

Like other professionals of the period, Albertson acknowledges that acting was not simply a matter of transcribing what one found in the script. She argues that an actor is a kind of prism

through which the character is refracted, and explains that '*the author supplies the material which actors cut and fit to their own personalities and physical appearances*'.<sup>42</sup> Here Albertson is not suggesting that actors play themselves. Instead, she is articulating the era's dominant view that an actor's instrument necessarily colours a performance, and that as a consequence an actor must take conscious control of it. Echoing Albertson's point, the Actors' Laboratory teaching staff describe the art of acting as one that incorporates in *sensible* terms and by means of the actor's personal equipment an impression or image previously indicated by the author. Acting experts of the period saw the process of acting as one in which actors take in an impression of the character from the script, and in the process of representing the character necessarily colour it with their own expression. Underscoring the period's holistic or organic view of this process, Morris Carnovsky explains that acting is never a passive experience because, as he puts it, 'there's no taking in [of the character] without giving out – no reaction without action. All is in process of becoming'.<sup>43</sup>

### Representing a dramatic character on screen

Materials from the period suggest that in the 1930s and 1940s, actors and their collaborators believed that actors should work to produce convincing performances without recourse to 'living the part'. Lillian Albertson explains that 'mental pictures', which an actor develops in the course of studying the script, make the events of the scene '*alive in [the actor's] memory*'.<sup>44</sup> Consequently they can be used by the actor to make his or her performance convincing, vivid, lifelike. Albertson exhorts actors to

make all the mental pictures you can in *preparation of the scene* – and the more graphic the better . . . make your mental pictures as real as you possibly can in *studying* the part, then *play from memory* – *the synthetic memories you have invented*.<sup>45</sup>

An interview with Jessica Tandy provides a gloss on Albertson's statement. When asked how she prepared for and then enacted her portrayal in the Actors' Laboratory stage production of *Portrait of a Madonna*, Tandy explained that she worked through the process she always had, first reading and rereading the script, then looking for points of contact with her own experience she could draw on, then developing a background for the character. For the performance she explains that she never recalled an emotion, but instead that the feelings which coloured her performance were always the result of seeing the pictures she had created in her study, and that each speech led to another through a series of mental pictures.

Manuals from the period explain that actors could and should use their mental pictures once they developed their ability to concentrate on them. Albertson explains that 'through *concentration* you learn to use the creative acting imagination, and concentration is something that *can be developed*'.<sup>46</sup> She argues that actors must develop their ability to concentrate on the character during performances because it is only 'concentration [that] enables you to shut out every thought but the scene and the character you are portraying'.<sup>47</sup> By using concentration to connect to the mental pictures one creates in studying the character in his or her given situations, you develop the *mind* that must "color" every action and every word you speak.<sup>48</sup> Albertson argues that it is not enough to move gracefully and naturally and to read lines intelligently. Instead, actors need to understand that 'to get every ounce of meaning



out of your lines . . . your MOOD [must] be what it should be [because] spoken words mean practically nothing unless mood colors them.<sup>19</sup>

For experienced practitioners of the period, moods that colour actions and lines of dialogue were established by actors making decisions about how a character would feel in a certain circumstance. Those decisions would become 'scripted' into a series of mental pictures, which actors would then recall during performance. Because they were 'synthetic memories' invented by actors during their study of the script, they could be activated by opening one's 'mental notebook', and let go of immediately after the scene or take was over. Albertson explains that 'as your powers of concentration increase, you will be able to turn mood on and off as readily and as surely as you turn on a faucet and get water, and turn it off to stop the flow!'<sup>20</sup>

Rosenstein's *Modern Acting: A Manual* anticipates Albertson's observations, and is especially clear that actors must learn to transfer emotions to the circumstances of the scene. Describing the role imagination plays in the process of preparing a part, Rosenstein and her colleagues explain that 'once we recall a former emotion we must sustain it long enough to transpose it to the new situation', and that while it may not be easy to dispense with recollected details, 'by constant drill . . . we can learn to drop them at will and preserve only the emotion they served to revive.'<sup>21</sup> In other words, for acting experts of the period, developing the ability to concentrate did not just keep actors from being distracted – it was seen as the basis of convincing performance.

For practitioners in the 1930s and 1940s, concentration, not feeling, was the key to great acting. Like other acting professionals of the period, Morris Carnovsky articulates the logic of striving to maintain emotional distance from the feelings portrayed. He explains that actors cannot get lost in emotional moments because they need to keep up with and anticipate the sequence of actions in the narrative. He writes: 'I always think of the actor as not only doing, but standing aside and watching what he is doing, so as to be able to propel himself to the next thing and the next thing and the next.'<sup>22</sup> Josephine Dillon also makes the point that actors need to be able to think about what they are doing, and she argues that acting in film makes emotional distance an especially high priority. Dillon explains that 'to submerge one's self into the emotion of the part being played would be to put the actor at the mercy of his emotions and make him incapable of using the skillful technique that the camera demands.'<sup>23</sup>

Drama coach Lillian Albertson continually contrasts the methods she describes with positions that encouraged actors to use their own feelings to generate convincing performances. Albertson notes that she had seen 'young actors in motion pictures try to lash themselves into a pathetic mood [by trying] to think of something real that [would] harrow their souls.'<sup>24</sup> She explains that in the process, actors would find themselves in an 'agonizing attempt to feel something' that was easily and invariably disturbed by the concrete reality of the performance and production context.<sup>25</sup> Albertson argues that the strategy of drawing on mood patterns and voice patterns that have been embedded into the mental pictures actors construct in their study of the part was a technique for generating lifelike performances that was 'much surer and far less wearing on the nervous system'.<sup>26</sup>

The ability to 'divorce outward gestures and expressions from their ordinary affective content'<sup>27</sup> prized by practitioners in the 1930s and 1940s, is precisely what proponents of Method acting in the 1950s would reject, for they saw that 'ability' as the source of inauthentic performance, and argued that dispassionate execution of performance, along with extensive

preparation and an investment in training the actor's physical instrument, necessarily led to performances and performance styles that were 'unrealistic' and unimaginative. Yet the methods described by Albertson, Carnovsky, Davis, Cronyn, and others who articulated the views of the 1930s and 1940s are not necessarily recipes for conventional performances. Instead, they represent a definable position in a long history of debates within the acting profession.

As stated by Denis Diderot in the eighteenth century, the paradox of acting is that one cannot act without feeling, yet if one feels one cannot act. For practitioners in the 1930s and 1940s, the solution to the paradox was to use synthetic memories to fuel controlled emotional experience during performance. Like Stanislavsky, they believed that actors should welcome personal and primary experience for the insights it could offer in the process of studying a script and building a character, but that during performance, actors needed to summon feelings that they had connected to the mental pictures they themselves had crafted after close study of the script. Like Stanislavsky, they argued that training, preparation, and cool-headed acting provided the secure basis for performances and performance styles that emerged from the unique demands of each script. And prosaic as it may sound, acting professionals of the period seem to have found that Hollywood's assembly-line mode of production, with its intense division of labor, developed within it rather efficient ways for actors and their collaborators to craft performances.

## Notes

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## PART THREE

# STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

## Introduction

The essays in the last two sections dealt with acting in general, either analyzing the status of film acting in general or broad historical trends in the creation and transformation of film acting in the early twentieth century. Essays in this section, by contrast, attend to specific performances or modes of performance, ranging from Lillian Gish's performance in *True Heart Susie* (1919) to Marlon Brando's performance in *On the Waterfront* (1954), and from 1930s American film comedies to European avant-garde and independent cinema. These essays represent a range of approaches to cinema acting. In addition to analyses of the external signs of performance, or, in other words, descriptions of what an actor or actress does on screen, these essays consider various theories of acting and actor training that lay behind individual performances, as well as general principles of performance for specific genres or modes of filmmaking. Just as the essays in the last section attested to the resiliency of seemingly outmoded styles of acting, such as the "historionic" style, and the overlap among acting styles in different historical periods, the essays in this section suggest that at any given moment in time, and even within a single performance, there is not a simple or singular approach to acting involved, such as a Delisartean system of poses or pure Method acting. Instead there exists a host of options that will be employed by an individual actor in a single film, within a genre across a series of films, or among members of an ensemble in a film or series of films. Offering varied approaches to acting and providing close and detailed analyses of acting in four distinct styles and time periods, the essays here furnish a glimpse of the wide-range of styles and techniques employed in film acting and provide models for future research.

Following on the heels of the transitional period in silent-film acting discussed in the essays by Roberta Pearson and Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs in the last section, it would seem that Lillian Gish's performance in *True Heart Susie* would be easy to place within the well-established "verisimilar" style. However, despite the fact that the dominant discourse around acting since at least 1914 emphasized "natural," transparent behavior, James Naremore claims that a close examination of Gish's 1919 performance shows her employing a wide variety of acting styles, and not just the dominant "natural" style. In a performance that Naremore says "ranges between innocence and experience, between stereotypical girlishness and wry, sophisticated maturity," Gish draws on techniques that range from the much-praised naturalism for which Griffith and