

tably reflect upon the pervasive theatricality of society itself. Such an approach will necessarily involve a reversal of the priorities usually adopted by film criticism; nevertheless it leads to many of the same themes, and it seems true to the way audiences and the movies in general have always focused on actors.

**Part One**  
**Performance in**  
**the Age of Mechanical**  
**Reproduction**

### The Performance Frame

*If we take a professional actor, . . . to film him through the "Kino-eye" would be to show the agreement or disagreement between the man and the actor. . . . Not Petrov in front of you, but Iva-nov playing the role of Petrov.*

—Dziga Vertov

Imagine for a moment that the short film I am about to describe was shot by some Los Angeles–based Dziga Vertov, a man with a movie camera setting out to record an incident on the streets. (The illusion will be dispelled almost immediately.)

The date was early 1914. In Venice, California, next door to Santa Monica, the citizens were staging a soapbox derby, and a director and his camera man went out to catch some of the action, bringing along a second crew that would take pictures of them at work. They were well prepared to get candid footage, and everything was set up correctly to demonstrate a dialectic between life and the camera. All they had to do was undercrank and overcrank a few shots, and then head back to their studio to photograph the process of editing: the documentary material would be cut together with scenes of the filmmakers at work, producing a conflict between the camera as recording instrument and the camera as instrument of semiosis. But almost from the beginning something went wrong. To be precise, an actor got in the way.

A brief account of the film's opening scenes will illustrate what happened.



It begins with a newsreel-style shot of the main street in Venice, with the camera positioned beside the roadway, looking diagonally across at a crowd of spectators. We see a couple of officials dressed in dark suits and lots of kids in knickers, a few of them scrambling across the street in the far distance. In the center of the image are a couple of soapbox race cars, one of them being pushed by hand across a starting line. But contemporary viewers can hardly register this information. They immediately notice a man at the far left of the screen, standing out a bit from the crowd. He is wearing a derby hat, a tight Edwardian coat, and baggy pants; he stands in a dancer's first position, the toes of his shoes pointed up like wings, and he is holding a curved-handled bamboo walking stick.

As the soapbox racer rolls off to the right, this man turns to watch it go, and we glimpse his face. He is more unkempt and mean-looking than the poetic fellow we know from later appearances, with a rather large nose, bushy brows, and a scruffy mustache. He seems to be drunk—his hair is sticking out beneath the bowler, he is weaving a little, and he is puffing madly at a cigarette. When the car passes, he wanders into the roadway, partly blocking the camera's view of the race. Somebody taps him on the back. He tips the bowler apologetically but turns toward us, walking a half dozen jerky, turned-out paces along the curb until he is in the exact center of the composition,



now completely blocking the view of a second car that has been rolled up to the starting line. He turns and stands for a moment, his back once more to the camera, his hat tilted at a raffish angle, and then suddenly spins around as if he had been yelled at by the cameraman. Looking toward us and frowning, he points a dainty finger offscreen right, responding to a "direction." Hurrying to go, he stays, shifting from foot to foot, clearly aware that he is being photographed. He then makes a quick right face and marches off, knees locked and toes pointed out. For a moment we glimpse a race car passing the starting line, but then, as if pulled by an invisible rubber band, the bowler-hatted figure pops back into the picture, looking into the camera. Curious, he pauses at the edge of the frame, gazing at us, twirling his cane in feigned nonchalance, and then exits.

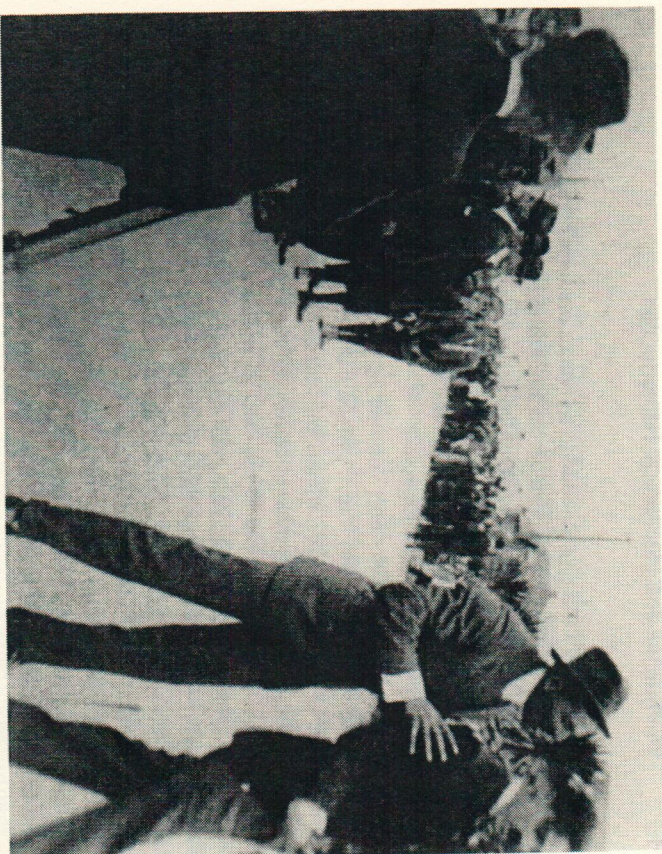
After a brief shot of the race in progress, we see a title card, "The Grand Stand," followed by a slow pan along a reviewing box, with a line of seated figures and a few rows of people standing behind. Several faces are smiling shyly, glancing sidelong at the camera with the tense pose of people who are trying to ignore it. The panorama is fascinating—boys in tight collars and walking caps, grizzled men and plain women; but suddenly, there, at the bottom corner of the picture, sitting on the curb alongside a grubby child, is the fellow from the previous scene. An unlit cigarette in his mouth, he is

looking off to the right, ostentatiously oblivious. When the camera starts to reverse its pan, he turns toward it, craning his head. As the panning movement continues, he casually stands up, blocking the view and sauntering along with the camera until he has moved clear out into the street. Apparently somebody yells at him again, because he looks toward the lens, gesturing to the right and then the left, pretending to be confused about where he should exit, all the while remaining at center stage.

By now the director (Henry Lehrman) has had enough. He walks briefly into the picture, shoves the intruder off, and then ducks behind the camera, which continues to pan. But the drunken tramp pops back, staring indignantly in our direction. The director returns and pushes him out of the picture again. Again he bounces back, easing along, pausing to raise a leg and strike a match on his pants. The camera has now moved a full 180 degrees and is aimed at the opposite side of the road. In the background a couple of dogs are circling at the edge of the crowd, sniffing one another; a few boys are craning their necks to watch the race and a few others are laughing, amused by the antics in front of the camera. As if inspired, the drunk now begins showing off: he lights his cigarette, shakes out the match, flicks it over his shoulder, and does a fancy little dance kick with his heel, bouncing the dead match away before it hits the road.

The film is only about four minutes long, and it consists of nothing more than this single gimmick, repeated over and over. The "drunk" keeps hamming it up for the camera, growing ever more aggressive and determined to ignore the director. When the camera crew tries to photograph the end of the race, he comes running and skipping down the middle of the street, flapping his arms like a bird, tripping over the finish line; when stray kids wander between him and the camera, he shoves them in the face; when the director starts knocking him out of the way, he dances around in little circles at the periphery of the shot and sticks out his tongue. Ultimately he "spoils" every scene in the newsreel.

He is, of course, Charlie Chaplin, and the film is *Kid's Auto Race*, a minor landmark in cinema history because it is the first film in which Chaplin appeared in the costume of the Tramp. When it is viewed in the light of Chaplin's later career, it becomes fascinating in many ways. For example, the pretended battle between Charlie and the director can be read prophetically, as an ironic dramatization of Chaplin's egocentricity, his determination to become a star and control every aspect of his films. (There was in fact a real-life conflict between Chaplin and the director Henry Lehrman, who is described in Chaplin's autobiography as a "vain" fellow, given to leaving the actor's best work on the cutting-room floor. Significantly, Chaplin describes an entirely different film as the one where he first wore the famous costume and conveniently forgets that Lehrman was directing when the Tramp was born [143-46].) As I have already suggested, it can also be read as an alle-



gory about the way the cinema tended to center on actors, relegating Vertov's Kino-eye to a secondary importance behind filmed versions of nineteenth-century theatrics. Where my own subject is concerned, however, *Kid's Auto Race* is especially interesting because it makes a structural use of two modes of performance, establishing a fundamental distinction that is important to the analysis of performance in general.

Like a great many of the early comedies produced by Mack Sennett, this small film involves a comic "turn" played off against life in the streets. Its humor and aesthetic pleasure depend on audiences' eventually recognizing Chaplin as an actor, distinguishable from the "real" people behind him. The paradox here is that the people in the background are performing, too—not only the scapbox drivers in the race, which is a performed event, but also the kids who scurry across the street and gawk at the camera, unwittingly providing a true version of Chaplin's mock hamminess. Everybody plays a role, from the stolid men who stand with hands in their pockets, pretending the camera isn't there, to the woman in a Victorian bonnet who sits in the reviewing stand and covers her face with a sheet of paper so as not to be photographed. The difference between Chaplin's performance and that of the others is that his is a clever professional mimesis, staged for the camera, whereas theirs is an everyday response, provoked by the camera or caught unawares.

Chaplin's performance is theatrical, and theirs is aleatory. *Kid's Auto Race* illustrates how the distinction between theatrical and aleatory events can be thrown into sharp relief and the audience can be invited to take pleasure in the difference between acting and accident. The technique derives not from cinema but from a very old tradition of street-corner mime that still survives today. I have seen a greasepainted and distinctly Chaplinesque clown create a show by standing across from people at a sidewalk café, designating some of his watchers as audience, others as participants. First he mimicked a traffic cop, lining up bystanders on the other side of the street, having cleared a sort of corridor; he began performing on the sidewalk, slipping behind innocent passersby and playing jokes on them. He could even move the playing area, drawing some of his audience into the spectacle by crossing the street and sitting at one of the sidewalk tables—where, for example, he tried to pick up a pretty young woman. By means of his costume and his elaborate gestures, he was able to establish what Erving Goffman calls a conceptual or cognitive "frame," bestowing a special performing significance on all the people or objects that came inside (*Frame Analysis*, 123–55). Ultimately, his show demonstrated that all social life is a kind of performance; after all, he was simply exaggerating the role-playing that was already happening on the street, turning it into theater.

The early semiotic theorists in the Prague Circle emphasized that this theatrical transformation happens in any exchange between a performer and the audience. A more recent writer on the subject, Keir Elam, has described the

a stage or playing area tends to "suppress the practical function of phenomena in favor of a symbolic or signifying role, allowing them to participate in dramatic representation" (8). In the simpler words of Jiří Veltruský, "All that is on the stage is a sign" (quoted by Elam, 8). Thus, given that cinema makes all the world a potential stage or performing frame, even a dog going about his doggy business (like the canines on a Venice street in *Kid's Auto Race*) can come a player.

Nevertheless, the primary frame that designates spectacle can contain various kinds of performance, and the audience does not usually regard dogs in the same way as humans. We commonly make a distinction between "real people" and actors, but we also assign the purely theatrical performers to different registers of dramatized action. For example, when the characters portrayed by John Forsythe and Linda Evans were married on an episode of the television show "Dynasty," Peter Duchin was the pianist at their wedding reception. Forsythe and Evans walked over and said hello to Duchin, using his real name, and he in turn congratulated them on their wedding, using their fictional names. On an earlier episode of the same show, Henry Kissinger appeared as Henry Kissinger—roughly like Napoleon showing up in a historical novel, except that Kissinger was really there, playing himself, the way John Wayne and William Holden once played themselves on "I Love Lucy." This suggests that people in a film can be regarded in at least three different senses: as actors playing theatrical personages, as public figures playing theatrical versions of themselves, and as documentary evidence. If the term *performance* is defined in its broadest sense, it covers the last category as much as the first: when people are caught unawares by a camera, they become objects to be looked at, and they usually provide evidence of role-playing in everyday life; when they know they are being photographed, they become role-players of another sort.

Technically, at least, *Kid's Auto Race* contains all these basic kinds of performance, with Chaplin playing a character, the director Lehman playing a director, and the crowd simply fulfilling their role as the anonymous masses in a newsreel. Notice, however, that the Lehman role does not actually qualify as a different type of performance because he is not enough of a celebrity for us to recognize him. True celebrity characters do not make their way into Hollywood fiction until a couple of years later, in 1916, when Chaplin appeared in a cameo role in one of Bronco Billy Anderson's Essanay pictures; in the same year Anderson reciprocated by doing a walk-on as "himself" in a Chaplin short.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon had reached full-blown comic self-consciousness by the time of King Vidor's *Show People* (1928), where Mar-

1. I am grateful to Harry M. Geduld for calling this fact to my attention, and for showing me *Kid's Auto Race*. In *Chapliniana* (1987), Geduld notes that *Kid's Auto Race* was the title used in the original Keystone logo. Most histories of cinema refer to the film as *Kid Auto Races at Venice*, but this is actually an abbreviation of the first insert title: "Kid Auto Races at Venice, California."

ion Davies plays Peggy Pepper, a callow youth who travels to Hollywood to become a "serious" actor: during her rise to success, Peggy meets a great many luminaries, including W. S. Hart, John Gilbert, Douglas Fairbanks, and Charles Chaplin (who appears in his own clothes rather than those of the Tramp, and who asks Peggy for her autograph). At one point, standing on the back lot of MGM, Peggy nudges her companion and points offscreen. "Isn't that Marion Davies?" a title card asks. Cut to a shot of Davies getting out of a car and walking across the lot. Cut back to "Peggy Pepper," who stares in awe at "herself."

Even the distinction between Chaplin and the bystanders (who could have been carefully trained actors) depends largely on the way *Kid's Auto Race* is received, because in the last analysis the aleatory quality of any film has less to do with how it was made than with what happens in an audience's mind. The point about *Kid's Auto Race* is simply that it allows, indeed encourages, its audience to recognize a difference between Chaplin and the bystanders. The makers of the film assume our familiarity with street-corner life, our knowledge of how people behave when they are photographed, and our awareness of a certain type of early documentary that they have parodied. Chaplin himself does certain things to notify us that he is a man pretending to be a drunken show-off rather than the thing itself. First of all he is a costumed figure, even if his clothing initially makes him blend with the crowd. On closer inspection, it becomes apparent that no one else in Venice, California, on that day was wearing a bowler hat, a frock coat, or an Edwardian collar. Looked at still more closely, his dress speaks to us in a systematic, orderly language that is different from the haphazard dialect of everyday life. In a famous passage of his autobiography he says he chose this outfit because "I wanted everything a contradiction" (144)—thus he is part tramp, part gentleman, with coat too tight and pants too baggy; his scruffy mustache indicates that he is a rascal, but dark makeup brings out the liveliness and sensitivity in his eyes; a bowler hat and cane give him dignity, but oversized shoes make him a clown. At every level his costuming is built on a set of formal contrasts that signify he is an art object, a figure who says, "I am an actor."

The same message is communicated by his position in the frame and his movements. Although the director is supposed to be avoiding Charlie, *Kid's Auto Race* is never allowed to become a decentered modernist film or a casual documentary. Much of its pleasure and comedy derive from Chaplin's ability to imitate and exaggerate a type of everyday performance and from his tendency to occupy a space on the screen that denotes theatrical interest. He is drawn to that area like a metal filing to a magnet, wandering off with great reluctance or being shoved out of view only to come jogging back. (At one point, infuriated with cinema and determined to ignore the director, he stands looking straight into the camera with haughty, chin-up dignity and wiggles

his eyebrows.) Although he imitates a man whose entrances and exits are inappropriate, we can sense his comic timing.<sup>2</sup> No matter how often he trips or falls, we know it is an act; despite the apparent foolishness of his character, he moves with theatrical eloquence, never using the transparent gestures of offstage communication. He walks with an eccentric, ballet dancer's waddle, feet splayed to the side and arms jauntily swinging. He turns on his toes, once or twice executing a perfect pirouette. He never simply stands, he *poses*. When he pretends to be a man who is pretending the camera isn't there, he does so with an exaggerated nonchalance or with the intense gaze of an explorer preoccupied with something on the far horizon. Even when the director shoves him down in the street, he somersaults, never losing his hat, cane, or pretended dignity, and snaps upright to resume his position.

All theatrical performance (even the naturalism of actors like Spencer Tracy and Robert Duvall) involves a degree of ostensiveness that marks it off from quotidian behavior. Chaplin, however, was one of the most ostentatious actors in the history of movies, so intent on exhibiting the virtuosity of theatrical movement that he is nearly always more stylized and poetically unnatural than the people he plays alongside. In this sense his work differs from the general run of movies, which do not make sharp contrasts between codes and styles of performance. Even today, when most films are shot on location, there is seldom any attempt to foreground theatricality by setting it off against accidental or found material. And although we recognize a difference between John Forsythe and Henry Kissinger, that is only because we know them from the media; both men have modeled their behavior on the effortless, transparent manner of everyday life. In fact the dramatic film has always fostered a neutral, "invisible" form of acting, so that highly theatrical techniques—Chaplin's pantomime, Dietrich's expressionist posing—are exceptions to the rule.

There is, however, a type of modernism—Brechtian or Pirandellian in its inspiration—that neither foregrounds the actor's gesture nor allows conventional transparency to go unexamined. Instead of making a clear demarcation between theatrical and aleatory codes, this sort of film problematizes the relation between actors, roles, and audiences, sometimes confounding the audience's ability to "frame" or "key" the action on the screen. Godard's *Breathless* (1960) is a case in point. A movie about the connection between roles played on film and roles played on the street, it casts Jean Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg self-reflexively, photographing them in quasi-documentary style. More than that, it requires them to imitate characters who imitate movie stars and who borrow their dialogue from the *roman policier*:

2. Commentators sometimes equate timing with pace, but the two things are different. A waltz, for example, is defined mainly by timing, or the temporal relation between movements; at any pace, it can be recognized as basically the same dance.

thus a great many of Belmondo's gestures become allusions, and his otherwise naturalistic performance evokes Brecht's notion that an actor should always behave as if he were quoting.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, too, Belmondo's work is deliberately set off against what appears to be aleatory material. Near the end of the film he staggers away from the camera, histrionically clutching a wound in the style of countless Hollywood gangster movies; as he struggles for a ridiculously long way down a street, we can see pedestrians on the sidewalk, going about their business or looking at his performance as if they were bystanders watching a movie. The sequence echoes a technique we have seen earlier when Belmondo and Seberg stroll down the Champs-Élysées, surrounded by people who turn to watch them or who glance at the camera. The effect here is slightly different from that of *Kid's Auto Race* because Godard has clearly introduced extras into the crowd—as when a Seberg look-alike does a double take as she walks past; at other moments, chiefly on the margins of the screen, it becomes impossible to distinguish actual pedestrians from actors, and theater and life seem to intersect.<sup>4</sup>

Godard's deliberate confusion of theatrical and aleatory codes serves to undermine the conventional notion of film performance. Unlike *Breathless*, the typical dramatic film regards acting as an artful imitation of unmediated behavior in the real world. The actor is taken to be an already completely formed person who learns to "think" for the camera. Thus a substantial body of intelligent critical writing has described the performances of the classic stars as if they were little more than fictional extensions of the actor's true personalities,<sup>5</sup> and in America the most celebrated postwar theater actors were actually *schooled* in how to perform themselves. "We believe," wrote Lee Strasberg, "that the actor need not imitate a human being. The actor is himself a human being and can create out of himself" (Cole and Chinoy, 623). Strasberg's reification of the self was so crucial to his thinking that Method training often extended to psychological therapy. An actor, he wrote, "can possess technical ability to do certain things and yet may have difficulty expressing them because of his emotional life. The approach to this actor's problem must therefore deal first with whatever difficulties are inherent in himself that negate his freedom of expression and block the capacities he possesses" (Cole and Chinoy, 623). Not surprisingly, Method-trained actors—many of whom

adapted well to Hollywood—all had an introspective, neurotic style vastly different from Chaplin's open theatricality.

A film like *Breathless*, for all its rough-and-ready appearance, tends to reverse such assumptions. Instead of treating performance as an outgrowth of an essential self, it implies that the self is an outgrowth of performance. "Performance," in turn, is understood in its broadest, most social, sense, as what we do when we interact with the world—a concept embracing not only theater but also public celebrity and everyday life. In its own brief, modest, and quite different way, *Kid's Auto Race* has similar implications: after all, comic theatrical performance has always been designed to expose and make fun of our social roles, and Chaplin was one of its masters.

Still another approach, in some ways like Godard's but in others more complex and contradictory, may be seen in Wim Wenders's *Lightning over Water* (1981). Conceived as a tribute to Nicholas Ray, it began as a thinly fictionalized work based on the real-life relation between two directors; but as Ray's disastrously failing health grew worse, the film was transformed into a self-conscious mix of theatricality, celebrity acting, and aleatory happening—a drama in which the leading player very nearly performs his own death. An extreme instance, it may help to complete and summarize the themes I have been discussing.

To emphasize a symbiosis between life and art, Wenders and his collaborators structured their work as a Pirandellian regression, employing a radical mixture of techniques that pay homage to Ray's last film, an unclassifiable piece entitled *We Can't Go Home Again*. Instead of producing a *cinéma-vérité* documentary or a set of interviews with Ray, they staged "true-life" scenes, occasionally shooting in *noir* style; alternatively, they recorded their own activity, often videotaping themselves with a Betamax. Throughout, the performances are so naturalistic, so much grounded in the actual situation, that we cannot distinguish what was planned from what was accidental—for example, near the beginning of the film we suddenly cut to a videotaped segment showing the preparation for a scene we have been watching: "Do you want this to be like acting, Wim?" Ray asks. "No, not at all," Wenders replies. Ray reclines weakly on a bed, coughing and gazing blankly into space, just as he has done in the "theatrical" sequence we have just seen.

By such means *Lightning over Water* indicates the way everyday behavior overlaps with theater; it also points to the social formation of personality, because the very process of working on the picture has created a role for Ray to act out.<sup>6</sup> At the same time it documents his suffering—revealing the signs

3. Godard's penchant for quotation is more evident in his later work. The following bit of dialogue in *Breathless* is borrowed from Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key*: "A friend of Belmondo meets him on the street and remarks, 'You oughtn't to wear silk socks with tweeds.'" Belmondo looks at his socks. "No? I like the feel of silk." His pal shrugs. "Then lay off tweeds."

4. A number of contemporary films have relied on a similar effect. See, for example, Henry Jaglom's *Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?* (1983).

5. Here, for example, is David Thomson, writing about Louise Brooks: "[She] was one of the first performers to penetrate to the heart of screen acting. . . . Quite simply, she appreciated that the power of the screen actress lay not in impersonation or performance, in the carefully worked out personal narrative of stage acting. . . . [but] in thinking out for herself the self-consuming rupture of Lulu" (*A Biographical Dictionary*, 72).

6. In other ways, the film seems romantic and Stanislawskian. "An actor," Ray tells Wenders at one point, "has to work from a character whose needs are his [own] greatest needs." Perhaps because of Ray's indebtedness to the Method, the plot of *Lightning over Water* involves a search for a hidden essence of personality, a true self that is supposedly revealed through documentary and psychological analysis of the players. Whenever it depends on these transcendent "needs," it becomes a less radical work.

of his cancer, filming him in an actual hospital bed, allowing miscues or other signs of the aleatory to break into scenes that have been rehearsed. Its chief strategy is to give Ray's performance an unstable, vulnerable, or ambiguous conceptual frame. Initially it creates a theatrical context for people to play "themselves," but as Ray's illness worsens, it allows normally out-of-frame activity to intrude upon illusion, making drama out of the way biology disrupts art.

And yet, even while the film lets an aleatory, biological fact become the center of dramatic interest, it cannot allow Ray's body to become an exclusive focus of the spectacle; it must place his suffering in the context of a story, if only the story of the film itself. This paradox runs through the history of theater: imperial Rome in the days of Livy might have put real sex and death on the stage, but in other cultures an involuntary biological process is seldom performed outright. Examples of pure biological performance on film tend to be marginal, like the deaths of animals in films such as *Le sang des bêtes* (1948) and *Weekend* (1967), plus such oddities as Fred Ott's sneeze, stage movies, snuff films, instructional cinema, and Warhol's *Sleep*: at the same time, all acting has a biological dimension, and biology often contributes powerfully to theatrical effect—witness De Niro's fatness in *Raging Bull* (1980) or the many cases where film exploits the decay of celebrity players (Montgomery Clift's ravaged face in *Judgment at Nuremberg* [1961], Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea's visible agedness in *Ride the High Country* [1962], and so forth). Hence *Lightning over Water* makes an interesting contrast with Don Siegel's *The Shooter* (1978), starring John Wayne. In both films the leading actor is a celebrity and a mythical figure who is dying of cancer; but *Lightning over Water* is a more direct, urgent, and makeshift work, and it rarely romanticizes its subject. Ironically, it shows Wenders and Ray talking in a hospital while a television set in the background announces that John Wayne has been hospitalized elsewhere.

Godard (paraphrasing Cocteau but echoing André Bazin's argument in "The Ontology of the Photographic Image") once wrote that cinema differs from painting because it "seizes life and the mortal aspect of life." "The person one films," he said, "is growing older and will die. We film, therefore, a moment when death is working" (81). Wenders gives a clear demonstration of this thesis in a lengthy close-up of Ray near the end of his film. The shot has something in common with the close-up of the dying Major Amberson (Charles Bennett) in Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942); in both cases the actor himself was dying as he played his role, but in *Lightning over Water* the actor looks back at us and testifies to his condition. He pauses in the midst of his dialogue, breathing heavily, trying to regain composure but unable to fight off illness. Moaning and cursing, he begins to make jokes, threatening to puke all over the camera. "I'm beginning to drool," he says, confessing embarrassment. Finally his situation becomes intolerable and he wants the scene to stop. Offscreen, we hear Wenders's voice telling Ray to

order a cut. Ray looks at the cameraman urgently and rather pathetically, anxiety showing in his one good eye, his lips drawn back over his false teeth like parchment over bone. "Cut!" he says, but the camera keeps running. For just a moment Ray looks angry and helpless. "Cut!" he says again, and he is forced to repeat the order before the screen fades to black.

"By exhibiting his proximity to death," Tom Farrell has written, "Nick's acting was organic; it was genuine behavior" (87). In one sense this is true, because the actor's body is different from the social construct we call the actor's "self." But in another sense *Lightning over Water*, like most movies, tends to put biology in the service of character. Ray becomes a man who wants to die in private, similar to the wounded soldier Hemingway writes about in *Death in the Afternoon* (later fictionalized by Thomas Mitchell in *Only Angels Have Wings* [1939]). In his close-up, culture interacts with nature, so that a familiar narrative type, a celebrity who is playing himself, and a man who is dying all merge into a single performed event. As a result, the image seems to partake equally of documentary and animated cartoon: we glimpse an empirical fact, a specific individual; but we "read" the individual's face and body in terms of expressive convention, just as we might read a line drawing. For a moment, the performance frame is extended more broadly than even Sennett or Godard attempted, until we can see its virtual limits.

## What Is Acting?

*The actor can only be said to be reproducing something when he is copying another actor.*

—Georg Simmel, *On the Theory of Theatrical Performance*

The preceding section describes Chaplin as an actor who mimes, mimics, or somehow imitates "real persons." In its simplest form, however, acting is nothing more than the transposition of everyday behavior into a theatrical realm. Just as the language of poetry is no different in kind from the language in a newspaper, so the materials and techniques used by players on the stage are no different in kind from those we use in ordinary social intercourse. This may explain why the metaphor of life as theater is so ubiquitous and convincing.<sup>7</sup> After all, in daily activity we constitute ourselves rather like dra-

7. Consider the situation in "real life," as described by Robert Ezra Park:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. . . . It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. . . .

In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we



matic characters, making use of our voices, our bodies, our gestures and costumes, oscillating between deeply ingrained, habitual acts (our "true mask") and acts we more or less consciously adopt to obtain jobs, mates, or power. There is no question of breaking through this condition to arrive at some unstaged, unimitated essence, because our selves are determined by our social relations and because the very nature of communication requires us, like Prufrock, to put on a face to meet the faces that we meet. Hence Lee Strasberg's notion that the stage actor does not need to "imitate a human being" is at one level entirely correct: to become "human" in the first place we put on an act.

As a result, words like "drama," "performance," and "acting" can designate a great variety of behavior, only some of which is theatrical in the purest sense. But given the affinity between theater and the world, how do we know this purity? How do we determine the important and obvious difference between performers in everyday life and performers who are behaving theatrically? The answer is not altogether clear, even though we often make such distinctions, and even though the basis on which we make them is crucial to the study of acting as an art or as a vehicle for ideology.

One solution to the problem has been offered by Erving Goffman, who defines theatrical performance as "an arrangement which transforms an individual into . . . an object that can be looked at in the round and without offense, and looked to for engaging behavior by persons in an audience role" (*Frame Analysis*, 124). The "arrangement" of which Goffman speaks may take a variety of forms, so long as it divides people into two fundamental groups, designating some as performers and others as watchers. Its purpose is to establish an unusually high degree of ostentation, a quality the actor Sam Waterston has called "visibility": "People can see you . . . all the lights

would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons (quoted by Goffman in *The Presentation of Self*, 19).

On the question of whether acting involves imitation, one of my early childhood memories seems appropriate. (Coincidentally, it belongs to a category of recollection that Freud once termed "screen memory" [III, 303-22].) I can recall asking my parents, at the age of four or five, whether the people in movies were really kissing. The question involved a moral dilemma, and whether the paradox: in fact, actors both do and pretend, sometimes at one and the same moment—hence the potentially scandalous nature of their work. In certain contexts, their actions can become *too* real, breaking the hold of illusion. For instance, film reviewer Vincent Canby was disturbed by a scene in *Devil in the Flesh* (1987), in which Maruschka Detmers performs a fellatio: "One's first response [is], 'Gee whiz, they're actually doing it!' Then one begins to wonder how it was staged. . . . It's a recorded, documented fact, which destroys the illusion as thoroughly as haitpieces that don't fit." (*Sex Can Spoil the Scene*, *New York Times*, 28 June 1987, 17.)

are turned out, and there is nothing else to look at" (quoted in Kaler, 156).

This showing (or showing off) is the most elementary form of human significance, and it can turn any event into theater. For example, the New York performance artists of the fifties and sixties were able to stage "happenings" by standing on a street corner and waiting for an auto accident or any chance occurrence that their role as audience would transform into a show; their experiments demonstrated that anyone—a juggler, a dancer, or an ordinary passerby—who steps into a space previously designated as theatrical automatically becomes a performer. Furthermore, not much conscious artistic manipulation or special skill is required to provide some kinds of "engaging behavior." When art theatricalizes contingency, as in *Kid's Auto Race*, John Cage's music, or Andy Warhol's movies, it puts a conceptual bracket around a force field of sensations, an ever-present stratum of sound, shade, and movement that both precedes meaning and makes it possible. Julia Kristeva seems to be talking about such a process when she refers to a "geno-text" or an "other scene" made available to communication by "significance," a pre-verbal activity she equates with the "anaphoric function." "Before and after the voice and the script is the *anaphora*: the gesture which indicates, establishes relations and eliminates entities" (270). Meaningless in itself, the anaphora is a purely relational activity whose free play allows meaning to circulate, even when meaning is unintended. All forms of human and animal exchange involve anaphoric behavior, and the "arrangement" Erving Goffman calls a theatrical frame could be understood in exactly those terms, as a primary gesture. It might take the form of a stage or a spot on the street; in the absence of these things, it could be a simple flourish of the hand or an indication to "look there." Whatever its shape, it always separates audience from performer, holding other gestures and signs up for show.

The motion picture screen is just such a theatrical anaphora, a physical arrangement that arrays spectacle for persons in an audience role. As in most types of theater, however, the actions and voices in movies are seldom allowed to "mean" by simply displaying themselves. This is especially true when the film involves *acting*—a term I shall use to designate a special type of theatrical performance in which the persons held up for show have become agents in a narrative.

At its most sophisticated, acting in theater or movies is an art devoted to the systematic ostentatious depiction of character, or to what seventeenth-century England described as "personation." Unplotted theatrics can partake of acting, as when rock musicians like Madonna or Prince develop a persona that has narrative implications; but to be called an actor in the sense I am using, a performer does not have to invent anything or master a discipline, so long as he or she is embedded in a story. The following example from the proscenium stage, cited by Michael Kirby, may serve to illustrate the point:

Some time ago I remember reading about a play in which John Garfield—I am fairly sure it was he, although I no longer know the title of the play—was an extra. During each performance he played cards and gambled with friends on the stage. They really played, and the article emphasized how much money someone had won (or lost). At any rate, since my memory is incomplete, let us imagine a setting representing a bar. In one of the upstage booths, several men play cards throughout the act. Let us say that none of them has lines in the play; they do not react in any way to the characters in the story we are observing. . . . They merely play cards. And yet we also see them as characters, however minor, in the story and we say that they, too, are acting. ("On Acting and Not-Acting," Battcock and Nicas, 101)

This kind of "received" acting is fairly typical of theater, but in the movies it has much greater importance, extending even to the work of the star players, who sometimes perform gestures without knowing how they will be used in the story. For example, it is rumored that during the making of *Casablanca* (1942), director Michael Curtiz positioned Bogart in close-up, telling him to look off to his left and nod. Bogart did so, having no idea what the action was supposed to signify (the film, after all, was being written as it was shot). Later, when Bogart saw the completed picture, he realized his nod had been a turning point for the character he was playing: Rick's signal to the band in the Café Américain to strike up the *Marseillaise*.

A more "scientific" illustration of the same effect is the so-called Kuleshov experiment, in which an actor's inexpressive offscreen glance was intercut with various objects, thus creating the illusion that he was emoting. Kuleshov described the process as if he were a chemist working in a lab: "I alternated the same shot of Mozhuikin with various other shots (a plate of soup, a girl, a child's coffin), and these shots acquired a different meaning. The discovery stunned me" (200). There is, unfortunately, something disingenuous about Kuleshov's account, which has created what Norman Holland calls a "myth of film history."<sup>8</sup> Even so, the "Kuleshov effect" is a useful term in film criticism, and anyone who has ever worked at a movie-editing table knows that a wide range of meanings or nuances, none of them intended by the script, the playing, or the *déoupage*, can be produced through the cutting. Audiences, too, are aware of a potential for trickery, and a certain genre of comedy or parody foregrounds the process: a recent TV commercial uses close-ups from the original "Dragnet," editing them to make Joe Friday and his partner seem to discuss the merits of a brand of potato chips; a video on MTV shows

8. Holland has pointed out that Kuleshov and Pudovkin, who worked together to produce the famous sequence, disagreed about exactly what it contained. The original footage has not survived, and there is no evidence that it was shown to an innocent audience ("Psychoanalysis and Film: The Kuleshov Experiment," 1–2). The sequence therefore has dubious status as either history or science, although a formal experiment seems unnecessary when movies have always proved Kuleshov's point.

Ronald Reagan piloting a dive bomber, gleefully attacking a rock and roll band; and Paramount's *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982) allows Steve Martin to play scenes with half the stars of Hollywood in the forties.

One reason these jokes are possible is that expression is polysemous, capable of multiple signification; its meaning in a film is usually narrowed and held in place by a controlling narrative, a context that can rule out some meanings and highlight others. As a result, some of the most enjoyable screen performances have been produced by nothing more than *typage*,<sup>9</sup> and it is commonplace to see dogs, babies, and rank amateurs who seem as interesting as trained thespians. In fact, the power of movies to recontextualize detail is so great that a single role frequently involves more than one player: Cary Grant acts the part of Johnny Case in *Holiday* (1938), but he performs only two of the character's many somersaults; Rita Hayworth does a "striptease" in *Gilda* (1946), but the voice that issues from the character's mouth as she sings "Put the Blame on Mame" belongs to Anita Ellis.

By slightly extending Walter Benjamin's well-known argument about painting in the age of photography, we could say that mechanical reproduction deprives performance of authority and "aura," even as it greatly enhances the possibility of stardom. Significantly, another of Kuleshov's "experiments" had involved the creation of a synthetic person out of fragmentary details of different bodies—a technique that undermines the humanist conception of acting, turning every movie editor into a potential Dr. Frankenstein. Nevertheless, Kuleshov was intensely concerned with the training of players, and audiences continue to make distinctions between figures on the screen, claiming that some of them are a bit more actorly than others.

Up to a point we can make such claims by simply quantifying the character traits exhibited by the performer. As a test case, notice a brief sequence early in *North by Northwest* (1958), when Cary Grant/Roger Thornhill goes to the Oak Room bar in the Plaza Hotel for a business meeting: Grant arrives late, introduces himself to three men waiting at a table, and orders a martini; after chatting for a moment, he suddenly remembers that he needs to call his mother, so he signals across the room to a messenger, asking that a telephone be brought to the table. The sequence involves a great many players, and we can rank them on an "actorly" scale, ranging from the extras in the background, who are rather like decor or furnishings for the hotel set, to Grant himself, who brings a fully shaped star image into the film and acts as the

9. *Typage*, a term coined by Soviet directors in the twenties, should not be confused with "type casting." *Typage* depends on cultural stereotypes, but, more important, it emphasizes the physical eccentricities of actors (often, by preference, nonprofessionals). Kuleshov argued that "because film needs real material and not a pretense of reality . . . it is not theater actors but 'types' who should act in film—that is, people who, in themselves, as they were born, present some kind of interest for cinematic treatment. . . . A person with an ordinary, normal exterior, however good-looking he may be, is not needed in cinema" (63–4).

central agent in the story. Between these extremes are the messenger boy, who must respond to Grant's signal, and the three businessmen around the table, who are given a few lines of dialogue. One of these men, however, is different from the others. For some reason—perhaps for the sake of verisimilitude, perhaps out of sheer playfulness—he has been allowed to cup a hand over his ear, lean over the table, and frown in bafflement because he cannot follow the conversation. His gestures, unnecessary to the cause-effect chain of the story, make him a slightly more identifiable character than his companions, and in one sense more of an actor.

In a more obvious form, acting in movies involves still another quality—a mastery, skill, or inventiveness that is implied in the normative use of the word performance. In fact all types of art or social behavior are concerned at some level with this sort of parading of expertise. Writing about Balzac, Roland Barthes remarks that “the classic author becomes a performer at the moment he evinces his power of *conducting* meaning” (S/Z, 174). One might say the same thing of a modernist like James Joyce, or of Barthes himself, whose verbal skill is foregrounded on every page and whose intellectual *tour de force* made him a celebrity. In literature, we can even speak of a “performative” sentence, as on the opening page of *Moby Dick*:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

Melville keeps the sentence in play, stringing out parallel constructions like a singer holding his breath, until that final moment when the period brings us to rest beside the sea. To read his words, we need to employ skills of our own, mentally repeating the rhythms, or perhaps interpreting them aloud so that our vocal cords participate in a dance of meaning. Oratory and most kinds of theatrical acting involve similar effects, and for that reason star performances in movies are often structured so as to give the audience a chance to appreciate the player's physical or mental accomplishments. Film problematizes our ability to measure these effects simply because it allows for so much manipulation of the image, throwing the power of “conducting” meaning into the hands of a director; nevertheless, one of the common pleasures of moviegoing derives from our feeling that an actor is doing something remarkable. Garfield playing poker, Bogart nodding his head, a minor player in a crowded scene—all these are clearly different from Chaplin/Hinkle in *The Great Dictator* (1940), bouncing a globe around a room in a long shot, or Hitler

In succeeding chapters I spend a good deal of time illustrating or tracing out varieties of ostentatious, actorly expertise; but at the outset it is important to stress that deliberate imitation or theatrical mimesis is not necessary to acting or to the effect of a “good” performance. In one sense it is misleading to call even Chaplin a mimic when the materials of his art—his body, his gestures, his facial expression, and all the techniques he uses to create character—are the same materials we use in everyday life. We are all imitators, and the terms *mime* and *ministry* come into play only at an extreme end of the scale of theatrical behavior, where the performer uses neither speech nor props or where the voice and body duplicate conventionalized stage gestures, creating recognizable stereotypes. Thus if a man shaves in front of a camera, he is transforming an everyday action into theater; if he shaves in the service of a story (like Nate Hardman in *Bless Their Little Hearts* [1985]), he is acting; if he goes through the same motions without a razor, he is miming, engaging in a “pure” imitation that A. J. Greimas has termed *mimetic gesture-ality* (35–37). Chaplin is an impressive performer in part because he is able to exploit the entire scale: at one moment in *The Gold Rush* (1925) he boils a shoe, but at the next he mimes eating, poking the laces into his mouth and chewing them as if they were spaghetti. During all this, he mimics a set of stereotypical characters, changing from cook to fussy waiter to gourmet as he moves through various stages of the meal.

The typical realist dramatic film affords few opportunities for such virtuoso imitation, although we occasionally see “copying” in naturalistic contexts: Belmondo mimics Bogart's gestures in *Breathless*, and in *Badlands* (1973) Martin Sheen takes on a remarkable resemblance to James Dean. To understand the skills involved in less visible forms of acting, it is necessary to examine behavior at a much more elementary level, analyzing the “transforming” elements or conventions that distinguish everyday utilitarian expressions from staged or scripted signs. One of the best ways to start such a project is to think of film in relation to the conventions that govern proscenium theater—a task I propose to undertake in the next chapter. Before that, however, I should like to add a few remarks about the motion picture screen, which creates a boundary between audience and performer unlike any other in theatrical history.

## The Actor and the Audience

“Are you talkin' to me?”

—Robert De Niro/Travis Bickle in  
*Taxi Driver* (1976)

All public institutions—classrooms, churches, houses of government—have a quasi-theatrical structure, an architecture that creates a performing

space. The space can take various forms, from lecture halls to roundtable discussions, allowing for more or less ambiguity in the relation between performer and audience. Even in the most formal situations, however, paying customers sometimes get into the act: professors call on students, magicians solicit volunteers, and stand-up comics endure hecklers. Where live theater is concerned, there are different degrees of freedom in the basic relation: at one extreme are the relatively participatory arrangements of circus, music hall, and most types of "epic theater." (The most completely open form is the theater of Jerzy Grotowski, in which a select group engages in communal activity; everyone becoming simultaneously audience and performer.) At the other extreme is the proscenium arch, which situates the audience in numbered rows of seats inside a darkened room, looking toward a rectangular opening on a lighted stage.

The proscenium, or "picture-frame," arrangement became the dominant form of Western theatrical architecture some time in the late seventeenth century, when theaters in England were permanently established indoors. At about that time—soon after the restoration of Charles II but coincident with the growth of a mercantile economy throughout Europe—playhouses underwent several other changes, all of them signaling the birth of modern drama: artificial lighting was introduced; female actors were allowed on the stage; extensive scenery and props were designed; and hidden wings were constructed at either side of the arch to permit movable sets. Such conventions fostered a "representational," illusionist theater, different from the relatively "presentational" style of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans. Eventually, the actor on the proscenium stage became a part of the decor—an object in a realist *mise-en-scène*—so that it was no longer necessary to describe elaborate settings with speeches or to invoke abstract spaces with gestures. Equally important, the actor's physical relation to the audience underwent subtle changes, as if an invisible "fourth wall" had descended between the drama and the auditorium. The public was seldom addressed directly; in fact, as increasingly sophisticated methods of stage lighting were developed, the audience became less visible to the actor, until it was simply out there somewhere, represented by a dark limbo, like the void that Susan Alexander sings to in *Citizen Kane*.

To some degree, the movement from presentational to representational theatrics corresponds to what Orson Welles, in a lecture on "The New Actor," delivered in 1940, described as a transition from "formal" to "informal" drama. The formal drama, Welles explained, belongs to rigidly hierarchical cultures; ritualistic in the true sense of the term, it inculcates no sense of actorly "style" or "personality." Informal drama, by contrast, grows out of a relatively flexible social organization; its actors are celebrated public figures who treat the audience on a somewhat personal basis. In the informal tradition, which for Welles included Shakespeare and all modern theater, "it is

impossible to be a great actor unless you deal with your audience" (2). Before the establishment of fully representational, picture-frame techniques, this "dealing" took specific forms: "We know that Chaliapin adored the gallery and loathed the expensive seats. The greatest moment for the Russian peasants was when Chaliapin sneered at the big people and played for the gallery when he did Boris Goudonof" (3). But in more recent times, Welles argued, the situation changed. "Even before the movies, actors stopped considering their audiences. It was the constant effort of people like Stanislavsky in a very serious way and John Drew in a frivolous way to pretend there is a fourth wall. This is death to acting style. It is practically impossible to create a new acting style which excludes the direct address to the audience" (3).

Even in the most pictorial proscenium drama, however, the audience remains present to the actor, sending out vibrations or signs that influence the intensity, pace, and content of a given performance. Live theater is always what Brecht described as "provisional," because it depends on an immediate interaction between two specific groups; and in the more presentational forms, this interaction is a major determinant of the show. Here is Mae West describing the vaudeville act she performed between 1912 and 1916:

I used to have to work an audience, appeal to them with little private gestures, twists of my head, the way I spoke a word, or winked over a song line. . . . I brought my own sophisticated ideas and style to the vaudeville stage but I had to adjust it to the standard of each theater, and even to each night's audience in the theater. . . . I usually found that one night a week you would get a top society crowd, and another night you'd get mostly working-class people. Other nights there would be family groups—especially on Friday nights when the kids didn't have to go to school the next day. (quoted in Stein, 25)

At the movies, on the other hand, the existential bond between audience and performer is broken. The physical arrangement is permanently closed, and it cannot be opened even if the performer speaks to us directly or if we make catcalls back at the show. Audiences can sometimes become part of the spectacle, especially at cult films like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), but the images never change to accommodate them. Likewise, movie performers can invite viewers to respond—as when James Cagney looks out at us in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942), asking that we join him in singing "Over There," or when David Byrne ironically pokes a microphone at the camera during one of his numbers in *Stop Making Sense* (1984). Nevertheless Cagney and Byrne will never know if their invitation is accepted. The unique property of film as spectacle is that the two groups that constitute theatrical events cannot momentarily change social roles. To do so would involve a magical transformation, like the one in *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), when the dreaming Buster Keaton walks down the aisle of a theater and steps right into the

silver screen—or like the roughly similar one in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), when the figures in a movie begin chatting with Mia Farrow as she sits in the diegetic audience.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the impenetrable barrier of the screen favors representational play-styles. (Presentational theatrics are possible in movies, but usually they are played for a fictional audience *inside* the film, a surrogate crowd.) The barrier also promotes a fetishistic dynamic in the spectator; the actor is manifestly *there* in the image, but *not there* in the room, “present” in a more intimate way than even the *Kammerspiel* could provide, but also impervious and inaccessible. Thus every filmed performance partakes of what John Ellis and other theorists have described as the “photo effect”—a teasing sense of presence and absence, preservation and loss (Ellis, 58–61). And because the performance has been printed on emulsion, it evokes feelings of nostalgia as it grows old, heightening fetishistic pleasure. Like the speaker in Philip Larkin’s “Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album,” the viewer sometimes feels a mingling of voyeuristic desire and bittersweet regret:

My swivel eye hungers from pose to pose—  
 .....  
 In every sense empirically true;  
 Or is it just *the past*? Those flowers, that gate  
 These misty parts and motors, lacerate  
 Simply by being over; you  
 Contract my heart by looking out of date.<sup>11</sup>

Recent developments in technology allow us to evade such feelings, inserting ourselves into the act by taking control of the machinery. We can purchase a VCR or an analyzing projector, manipulating the images and repeating them forever; in doing so, however, we usually prolong the sense of

10. The terms “diegetic” and “nondiegetic” have become commonplace in contemporary film theory, enabling us to make important formal distinctions. A film’s diegesis is composed of everything that belongs to an imaginary world or “story space.” Thus if a character turns on a radio and we seem to hear music coming from it, we can describe the music as “diegetic.” A barren hearth does not have a source in the story—for example if we see lovers on a barren hearth embrace to the accompaniment of a full orchestra—we describe the music as “nondiegetic.” Besides music, typical nondiegetic elements in Hollywood movies include credits, superimposed titles such as “Phoenix, Arizona,” and certain types of spoken narration.

11. Larkin’s male persona is more articulate and self-aware than most viewers. He recognizes that he derives pleasure from photographs because they make no demands; by passively allowing themselves to be watched, they free him of responsibility:

in the end, surely, we cry  
 Not only at exclusion, but because  
 It leaves us free to cry. We know *what* was  
 Won’t call on us to justify  
 Moon I call on us to justify  
 Our grief, however hard we yowl across  
 The gap from eye to page.

private play, elaborating a *fort/da* game that film has always encouraged.<sup>12</sup> Consider, for example, Charles Affron’s rapt discussion of what he calls the “power” and “dominion” given to spectators by the apparatus: “Garbo can die for me around the clock. I can stay her in that final moment of her life; I can turn off the sound and watch, turn off the picture and listen, work myriad transformations in speed and brilliance, and then restore the original without losing a particle of its intensity” (5). For all his emphasis on the power of the viewer, however, Affron is talking less about freedom than about the erotics of textual analysis. Garbo has become the perfect fetish object, the ultimate Romantic Image, her performance balanced between an imaginary plenitude and what Yeats described as “the cold snows of dream.”

There is, of course, another side to this issue, and I think it is implicit in what Affron says. The same machinery that fetishizes performance also permits it to be deconstructed or replayed in ways that run counter to its original intentions; the apparatus (especially when joined with video technology) allows the audience to become postmodernists, alienating the spectacle, producing a heightened awareness of the artificiality in all acting—even the kind of acting that constitutes our daily life.<sup>13</sup> By freezing the frames of a movie, by running them at different speeds, we can institute what Terry Eagleton has described as a “Derridian ‘spacing,’ rendering a piece of stage business exterior to itself . . . and thus, it is hoped, dismantling the ideological self-identity of our routine social behavior” (633). Here again Walter Benjamin’s arguments about the effect of photography on painting seem to apply equally to the effect of media on acting. The performance, having become a text, is no longer part of a specific architecture; it now comes to people, who can glimpse it at home in bits and pieces. Under these circumstances, it has less to contribute toward the “theology of art.”

The closed boundary between audience and performer has had similarly complex effects on society in the aggregate, partly because the actor’s work is no longer “provisional” but fixed, geared toward an imaginary individual

12. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes a game he once saw an infant playing. The child enjoyed “taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on.” As he did this, he always shouted a syllable that Freud interpreted to mean “fort,” the German word for “gone.” One day Freud observed him playing with a wooden reel attached to a piece of string. Shouting “fort,” the boy held the string and tossed the object away; he then pulled it back, celebrating its reappearance “with a joyful ‘da’ [‘there’].” Freud called this the *fort/da* game, and used it to illustrate the “economics” of the libido. According to Freud, the child was compensating for the fact that his mother sometimes went away, “by himself staging the disappearance and return of objects within his reach” (XVIII, 14–16). For a commentary on this process in relation to cinema, see Stephen Heath, “*Anata mo*,” *Screens* (Winter 1976–77): 49–66.

13. Throughout this discussion I have collapsed film and television together, but I should point out they often promote a quite different relation between audience and performer. For an interesting commentary on the issue, and on ways video has been made to conform to more traditional conceptions of the audience, see Lili Berkov, “Discursive Imperialism,” *USC Spectator* (Spring 1986): 10–11.

who represents the mass. Thus when Mae West brought her vaudeville persona to talking pictures, her old technique of adjusting to the makeup of a specific audience was useless. Like a writer imagining a reader, she had to play for an idealized viewer—or for her directors, producers, and fellow players. One result of this new arrangement was an increasing homogenization of the culture, which began to seem like a global village. "Today," West observed in 1959,

motion pictures, radio, and television have brought Broadway sophistication and big city ideas to even the remotest of green communities. Today there is no longer such a thing as a "hick" audience. Almost anything goes, anywhere, if it is good and fast and amusing. Risqué material is only offensive if badly done without style and charm. (Stein, 280)

But definitions of "style and charm" can vary, depending on the cycles of liberalism and conservatism in society at large—a fact West herself must have realized in the mid thirties, when the Production Code made her work in movies increasingly problematic.

Like West, film actors must respond indirectly to mass opinion; but cinema also "constructs" its spectators more rigorously than any other form of theater, so that both players and viewers ultimately resemble lonely individuals, looking into a mirror. This profound change in the dynamic of performance was a matter of great concern to the intellectuals who wrote about early movies, although they sometimes disagreed about its influence for good or for evil. Populist Americans like Yachel Lindsay and Hugo Münsterberg were optimistic; worshippers of the "universal language" of the silent screen, they believed mass media could democratize society—raising the level of sophistication, spreading sweetness and light, working as a force of education. By contrast, most Europeans and Anglophiles were pessimistic. In the twenties, T. S. Eliot was convinced that the rise of the movie house and the subsequent death of the English music hall would contribute to a deadening *embourgeoisement* of English culture:

With the death of the music-hall, with the encroachment of the cheap and rapid-breeding cinema, the lower classes will tend to drop into the same state of protoplasm as the bourgeoisie. The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art. He will now go to the cinema, where his mind is lulled by continuous senseless music and continuous action . . . and will receive, without giving, in that same listless apathy with which the middle and upper classes regard any entertainment of the nature of art. He will have also lost some of his interest in life. (225)

Eliot's essentially right-wing argument has something in common with the left-wing responses of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, who regarded cinema as opiate for the masses. Among the Germans, Brecht was perhaps the most aware of mixed blessings in the new media. His short essay on radio, written in the thirties, could be used to summarize the concerns that lie behind all discussions of the relation between audience and performer in the age of mechanical reproduction:

Radio is one-sided when it should be two-. It is purely an apparatus of distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change the apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him. (52)

Unfortunately, Brecht's proposed solution cannot be applied to movies, and other types of "mass communication" have seldom realized their potential for democratic exchange: examples of "two-way" performances in America today would range from progressive broadcasts such as "The Phil Donahue Show" to various "prayerline" evangelists. Where ordinary film acting is concerned, the point to be remembered is that even though modern society has brought performers close to us, in many ways it has made them seem farther away, more fabulous than ever.