Introduction

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This is a book about the art of film acting, but I had better make clear from the outset that it will not teach anyone how to become a successful performer. My approach is theoretical, historical, and critical, and I write from the point of view of a voyeur in the audience. Terry Eagleton has remarked that such writing ought to produce bad actors. Perhaps he is correct, but my own aim is simply to make readers conscious of behavior they usually take for granted.

At a certain level, of course, we easily recognize the flourishes, emotional intensities, and expressive nuances of acting in the movies—indeed we are supposed to recognize them. Even so, the most interesting figures on the screen often look "natural," as if they were merely lending themselves to the manipulations of script, camera, and editing; the work they do is variable and vague, and critics usually discuss them as personalities rather than as crafts-people. This potentially contradictory attitude is significant, suggesting that the very technique of film acting has ideological importance. After all, one purpose of ideology (as defined by most contemporary theory), is to seem the most natural thing in the world, understandable only in terms of common sense. In the book that follows, therefore, I have tried to analyze conventions of filmed performance in some detail, isolating them both at points where they are obvious and at points where they are relatively invisible. By such means I hope to reveal buried, paradoxical assumptions about society and the self.

I hope also to indicate something about the theatrical quality of movies and of ideology in general—an issue that has been neglected in criticism,

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partly because intellectuals have wanted to legitimize cinema by emphasizing its difference from the stage, and partly because analysis and interpretation of drama have always given priority to matters of plot. In one sense, the actor's traditional strategy is perfectly understandable; as I shall argue later, the actor hardly exists except as an agent of narrative, and movie performers cannot be discussed apart from the many crafts that surround and construct them. Nevertheless, most academic film critics, even when they exhibit a sophisticated knowledge of technology, are excessively novelistic. Clearly films depend on a form of communication whereby meanings are *acted out*; the experience of watching them involves not only a pleasure in storytelling but also a delight in bodies and expressive movement, an enjoyment of familiar performing skills, and an interest in players as "real persons."

Unfortunately, the attempt to describe some of these things in writing is rather like wrestling with Proteus. As many theorists have noted, actors use analog techniques; their movements, gestures, and inflections are presented in gradations of *more* and *less*—subtle degrees of everchanging expression that are easy to comprehend in the context of a given film but difficult to analyze without falling back on unwieldy tables of statistics or fuzzy, adjectival language. I have not been able to avoid this problem entirely, although I prefer adjectives to statistical tables. At best, I try to mix phenomenological description with other methods, showing how performances can be understood in roughly the same way as "narratology" has understood plots. In the process, I have been aided by a series of writers on performance from outside film—especially by Stanislavsky, Brecht, and the "Chicago school" of social anthropology.

Among these writers, Stanislavsky is perhaps the best known and most influential on the culture at large. Nearly all forms of actor training in the United States today are approximately Stanislavskian, whether or not he is recognized as a source, and most film reviewers operate from Stanislavskian assumptions; in fact, Stanislavsky's disciple, V. I. Pudovkin, is responsible for the first important book on the technique of film acting. As a result, I have used Stanislavsky's name in two ways, sometimes quoting him directly, sometimes referring to "Stanislavskian aesthetics" to designate an expressive-realist attitude that determines most of the films we see. The hallmark of such an attitude is the belief that good acting is "true to life" and at the same time expressive of the actor's authentic, "organic" self—hence the typical movie advertisement: "Clint Eastwood *is* Dirty Harry." In more specific terms, however, Stanislavsky is the great exponent of naturalism. All varieties of teaching derived from his work try to inculcate spontaneity, improvisation, and low-key psychological introspection; they devalue anything that looks stagy, and in their extreme form—namely in the work of Lee Strasberg—they lead to quasi-psychoanalytic rehearsal techniques, inviting the actor to delve into the unconscious, searching out "truthful" behavior.

Stanislavsky and his followers are essentially romantics, contested at every point by the radical modernism of Brecht. The antirealistic Brechtian player is more like a comic than a tragedian, concerned less with emotional truth than with critical awareness; instead of expressing an essential self, she or he examines the relation between roles on the stage and roles in society, deliberately calling attention to the artificiality of performance, foregrounding the staginess of spectacle, and addressing the audience in didactic fashion. The movement from Stanislavsky to Brecht therefore involves a shift in emphasis from psychoanalysis to semiotics, from inner contemplation to social praxis. Indeed Brecht's writings have something in common with traditional social science, which uses concepts like "performance" and "role playing" to analyze nontheatrical behavior. This tendency is especially marked in the theoretical work of Erving Goffman, who suggests that all forms of human interaction are in one sense stagy and that notions of "character," "personality," and "self" are merely outgrowths of the various roles we play in life.

Throughout my own study, I have tried to keep the old tensions between Stanislavsky and Brecht alive, criticizing the dominant form without dismissing it. I have also drawn a good deal from Goffman. As a "scientist," he never makes judgments about art; like Brecht, however, he is interested in defamiliarizing actorly behavior, and he makes useful distinctions between theater and the daily presentation of self, ultimately helping us to understand how these two fundamentally important but quite different modes are interrelated.

Having suggested my interests and influences, I need only comment on the organization of the book. The text is divided into three sections, each devoted to a slightly different task. Part 1, "Performance in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," is mainly theoretical, employing a wide frame of reference. Although I concentrate throughout on the Hollywood narrative cinema, I needed to place my discussion in a larger context, alluding to everyday life, to traditional theater, to television, and to "foreign" directors like Wenders, Godard, and Bresson. By including such materials, I was able to define the central terms of my argument, to offer a general description of the work of film acting, and to comment on the ideological assumptions certain performances can involve. I was also trying to develop what Roland Barthes might have called a structuration, or a set of formal distinctions that can be applied to all types of theatrical performance. As a result, the chapters in part 1 are designed to treat systematically the following concerns:

(1) A framing or cuing process that establishes a boundary between performers and audience, producing an elementary theatrical event. The boundary can be more or less ambiguous, eliciting different sorts of interaction between two social groups.

(2) A set of rhetorical conventions, controlling the ostensiveness of the players, their relative positions within the performing space, and their mode of address to the audience.

(3) A series of expressive techniques governing such matters as posture, gesture, and voice, and regulating the entire body as an index of gender, age, ethnicity, and social class.

(4) A logic of coherence, enabling the players to seem more or less in step with changes in the story, more or less in character, and more or less "true to themselves."

(5) A *mise-en-scène*, shaping the performance to a greater or lesser degree by clothing, makeup, and a variety of inanimate objects with which the actor comes into direct contact.

I might have termed this structure the "five codes" of performance, inventing names for each item in the list: the boundary code, the rhetorical code, the expressive code, the harmonic code, and the anthropomorphic code. I have preferred, however, to repress jargon and not pursue the analogy with Barthes too far; instead I allow my distinctions to emerge in more general ways from a series of four rather discursive chapters, sometimes invoking them again later when they seem appropriate to the analysis of individual actors. At the same time, I try to indicate how the basic formal structure can be mapped onto history, technology, and the politics of spectacle.

Part 2, "Star Performances," deals with particular circumstances, where exceptions to the general rules begin to appear. In this section, composed largely of practical criticism, I examine the techniques of seven important players in specific films. As stars, they are special cases: each is an extra-literary character whose name circulates through publicity, biography, and everyday language; each is also known for an idiolect, a set of performing traits that is "systematically highlighted in films and sometimes copied by impressionists. To deal with such matters, and to suggest the influence stars have had over scripts and directors, I have usually placed my discussions in the context of more general accounts of entire careers, relating individual actors and pictures to the themes of fame, celebrity, and myth.

The people I selected to discuss in part 2 have little in common except an expressive vivacity, a certain androgynous quality, and a tendency to make acting or role playing the subject of their performances. They all have legendary status, and I have not concealed my admiration for their work; in fact one of my purposes is to stress the important artistic contributions players usually make to films. I should emphasize, however, that my choices are not meant to suggest a pantheon, or even a list of personal favorites. These chapters will probably indicate something about my obsessions, but I was not writing purely out of my own desire. Had I done so, the book would have been more aestheticized or hedonistic, filled with idiosyncratic commentary on relatively minor figures like Diana Lynn, Gloria Grahame, Claude Rains, and Alan Ladd. My overriding aim is merely to illustrate a variety of acting styles and star personae, ranging from the silents of Griffith and Chaplin to

the advent of the Method. I have avoided performers of musical comedy, staying mainly within the confines of realistic drama, and in most cases I have selected films my readers would know fairly well. Seven names seem enough for my purpose, but I am painfully aware of many fine actors I chose to eliminate. (I especially regret the omission of Barbara Stanwyck, to whom I refer several times in part 1, and of Richard Pryor, who seems to me more gifted than Chaplin but whose best work has been done in concert films. Had I included Pryor, I might have been able to discuss indirectly an issue that is in need of further research: the influence of blacks on the American performing idiom, despite the fact that they are usually unrepresented, marginalized, or parodied by Hollywood cinema.)

Part 3, "Film as a Performance Text," is a synthesis of the previous sections, dealing with the work of ensembles in two films. Both films depend on the audience's familiarity with the star system, both involve the theme of performance, and both use a complex variety of casting techniques, rhetorical strategies, and acting styles. By analyzing them in detail, I attempt to show the many ways a narrative motion picture can be discussed under the rubric of "theatricality," and I summarize the argument of the book as a whole.

Running behind these last chapters, and behind the entire book, is an indirect commentary on the social and psychological foundations of identity. Fairly early on, I indicate that one job of mainstream acting is to sustain "the illusion of the unified self," or what Pudovkin called "the organic unity of the acted image." Western culture as a whole, from at least the Renaissance onward, has depended on a roughly similar kind of work; thus we tend to think of ourselves as unified, transcendent subjects of experience who express an innate personality through daily activity, ultimately becoming star players in our personal scenarios. Our "commonsense" view of life might be described, in the words of critic Catherine Belsey, as a blend of empiricism, humanism, and idealism—a philosophy that conceives of reality as a camera-eye narrative, with human consciousness as the seat of truth. (Consider John Locke, the founder of British empiricism, who regarded the mind as a camera obscura, or "dark room," receiving impressions and transforming them into reasonable wholes through the power of the soul.) In fact, however, as a great deal of recent work in linguistics, literary theory, psychoanalysis, and film studies has attempted to show, common sense is illusory; the self is more like an effect of structure—a crowd of signifiers, without any particular origin or essence, held in place by ideology and codes of representation.

Perhaps we can learn something about this phenomenon by looking at the insubstantial images of movie players, who persuade us so convincingly of their individual reality. By analyzing the paradoxes of performance in film, by showing how roles, star personae, and individual "texts" can be broken down into various expressive attributes and ideological functions, we inevi-

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