Close-up: great international performances

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Humans are storytelling creatures, and as, in the last century, the dominant medium for public narratives shifted from theater to cinema, cinema placed the fruits of performative labor before the eyes of the world in an unprecedented way. What actors do in front of the camera remains central to the attraction of cinema for audiences, and influences—even marks the standard for—performance styles in other audiovisual media. Indeed, one could go further: many of the figures discussed in the pages that follow became cultural and mythical icons in the global consciousness of their time. Audiences care about actors, the characters they create, and the responses they engender. Performances are even the reason some films are preserved. But beyond vague assertions about which performances are ineffably great, profoundly moving, hopelessly terrible, or cringe-worthy, relatively little discussion of what actors *really do* exists, either in popular or academic film criticism. Movements within the discipline of Film Studies (semiotics, psychoanalysis, cognitive psychology, and so forth) tend to look first to the sciences, and thus outside films themselves, for legitimate—meaning objective—means of verifying claims about movies.

This poses a problem for the analysis of performance, as we respond to and love the displays of feelings, desires, and intentions at a personal level, if also collectively. We might thus wish to grapple with questions of what makes a performance meaningful, how we can share this sense, and, in sharing, possibly come to agreement. How do we journey experientially and thoughtfully from the obvious to the ineffable, from a jitter to a movement to a gesture? Or from the perception of a seemingly ordinary gesture to the more meaningful revelation of the significance that such gestures are ordinary? Why does this often feel like an epiphany? How many others experience it as significant in the same way? Why do we feel such a distinctive fellowship

when another person responds to a performance just as we do? Answering such questions helps us to better grasp the aesthetics and politics of cinematic performance, and, in turn, the relevance of particular performances to the styles of individual directors, even the development of national cinemas and the cultures those cinemas shape.

In our introductory chapter to Volume 1, we expound on the treatment of acting within the history of Cinema Studies, detailing the field's general anti-performance critical stance. What we did not point out there is that if this negative stance lends a deliciously indulgent flavor to analyzing the pleasures of cinematic acting, and such indulgence certainly need not be opposed to scholarly rigor. Our aim is to situate performance as an element worthy of attention *as cinematic*. Doing so could include considering the composition of the shot—the "body in space" strategy of appreciating actorly presence that has been in vogue for the past few years—but the authors of the following chapters do not limit themselves to this approach, one that reduces the complexity of performance and relies on an ontology of film that is strictly visual. The authors here are not afraid of the psychological, and discounting that in the name of "the cinematic," or out of a commitment to critical ideology that avoids the individual psyche, is to misunderstand a key aspect of most audience members' experience. Besides, performed expressions must be an expression *of* something: exteriority requires interiority.

We do not intend that the performances herein designated "great" should seem singled out simply because they are achieved by some of the most famous screen actors or because they appear in films that have been dubbed canonical at some point in cinematic history. "Great" is meant as a capacious term, not one that solidifies a canon of objectively *best* performances. Authors offer up perspectives on single performances because they are especially moving, unique, or interesting. A great performance may overtake the film, or the film may be unimaginable without it, inspiring us to reflect on the (as Roland Barthes would have it) *puncta* around which we build our ideas of filmic worlds, which may be achieved in different ways in different nations, periods, and cultures.

Performance around the world

The division between American and International cinema risks implying that the US is not part of the world; or worse, reinforcing its power as globally dominant. It also risks implying that a clean division is possible,

delineated so clearly by side-by-side volumes. There are certainly a few tricky instances, particularly when demarcating US and UK productions. For example, James Ivory's *The Remains of the Day* (1993) was produced by Merchant Ivory, a company that made films in both the United States and the United Kingdom, and distributed them through the Hollywood-based Columbia Pictures. James Ivory is himself American, while Indian-born Ismail Merchant became a British citizen, and lead actress Emma Thompson is British. There is a case to be made for the film as American, yet we felt we could not deny its reputation as a British heritage film, nor the richly British inflection and construction of Thompson's performance. Similar ambiguities surround pinpointing the national identity of other films in this volume, such as Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1950), Lewis Gilbert's *Alfie* (1966), and Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2001). There is a further danger in including performances from a wide array of cinematic histories from different nations, namely, that single performances or performers may be understood to stand in metonymically for complex, robust aesthetic legacies. At the same time, one must not avoid situating performances within their national and transnational contexts, and several chapters do this. Two examples are the chapters by Corey Creekmur and Dolores Tierney. Creekmur teaches us that in order to understand Madhubala's achievement in her role in K. Asif's *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), we have to understand the performance codes unique to popular Hindi cinema. Indeed, what might seem histrionic to Western eyes and ears is vitally central to the style that Madhubala harnesses in order to look back at the audience in self-awareness, commenting upon her character's erotic allure and tragic fate. *The Motorcycle Diaries* is, as Tierney explains, a multinational co-production, and involved funding from, among other countries, Chile, Peru, Argentina, and France, as well as from the American independent sector. It is partly through these intersections of contexts that Tierney considers Gael García Bernal's depiction of the young Ernesto "Che" Guevara as both fetching and radical.

Even in light of these taxonomical complications, we believe that the division between American and International cinema is a helpful one. Mainstream American cinema rooted itself in performance more than other national cinematic traditions, and has wielded enormous influence on the development of global cinemas at the level of production and distribution models. In this respect, the two volumes of this set inform each other and comprise a whole. Patterns and flows of gesture and style emerge, yet we make no claim to offer the global geography of film performance. Surely it will be evident, as well, that there are omissions.

We made the attempt to collect, in an arbitrary way, performances that struck us as eminently notable and important, rather than offering a representative picture of the cinematic global scene to date. Finnish, Israeli, Argentinian, Belgian, Moroccan, and numerous other cinemas and performers will not, sadly, be found here; but neither will legion other stunning performances from cinematic cultures already well represented, such as those of England and France. As international cinephiles, when we experience a performance from a national culture with which we are unfamiliar—a possibility continually diminishing in the age of globalization—we may feel not just that the world is being reflected but that *our* world is expanding. Indeed, there is no denying that we can fall in love with a performance in part because it is foreign to us; it presents us with all the excitement that the unknown affords (even as we refuse to exoticize or Other the sights and sounds we encounter). We may be moved by a performance that makes the foreign familiar, encouraging us to feel that we intuitively understand something about life in another culture or historical epoch. Or unfamiliar performances and performance styles may simply let us practice our language skills.

Beyond stardom

When approaching performance as cinematic, as a formal element, one may naturally be tempted to think in terms of stardom. And, as we discussed in depth in the introduction to Volume 1, the phenomenon of the movie star is so pronounced that it has been regarded as intrinsic to the medium's specificity, regardless of national aesthetic differences. Accordingly, stardom has received much attention in the history of film criticism, both academic and otherwise. The art of performance, however, has received less attention. Although within Film Studies "the actor" has often served as an ideological category opposed to "the star," the work of screen actors is still usually regarded merely as an element among elements, or as a craft, a *techne*. But being a star has no necessary connection to being an excellent performer. Star studies, as Wojcik puts it, is not "inclined to deal extensively with acting *per se*" and tends "to extract particular mannerisms or gestures that are repeated across a body of films as a feature of the star's persona" (7). We can anticipate further studies in significant cinematic performances given at the character-player level.

This is not to say that this volume ignores stardom and star power. On the contrary, many remarkable performers *use* the star persona they created across multiple appearances. Performances can be forged in dialogue with personae, blurring the lines between the creation of a character and a star turn, in ways that invite audience reflection and symphonic registers of meaning. Jerry Mosher argues that Emil Jannings's training and fame as a silent actor affects his work in the talkie Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930). With the medium's newfound ability to be silent, *The Blue Angel* takes advantage of Jannings's pantomimic talents while building to the jouissance of the character finding his voice in the release of a bestial bellow. Ulka Anjaria situates Amitabh Bachchan's performance in Yash Chopra's *Deewaar* (1975) in relation to other performances by the star, and by other actors in the film. In examining this constellation, and how Bachchan acts a façade that crumbles, Anjaria reveals that the character types that scholars write into history are often too coarse, and that finer things are really going on, as, in this case, lessons about the limits of masculinity and anger. Adrienne McLean illuminates how, in *8½* (1963), Marcello Mastroianni manages to play both himself and director Federico Fellini at the same time. His star persona and the director's exist together, and the mystery that results from the fact that we may never be able to distinguish their boundaries is integral to the lure and legacy of the film. Or, to take a more recent case, Noah Tsika reads Andy Amenechi's *Mortal Inheritance* (1996) as hinging upon Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde's unique ability to show equanimity in the face of adversity. The film itself thus becomes a testimony to the actor's talent and relentless stoicism.

But stardom does not always simply animate a performance. It is sometimes easy to forget that star personae are *predicated upon* performances, not just effulgences that shine down from the screen upon us. Janet Bergstrom works systematically through each of Peter Lorre's scenes as the tragic murderer in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931), a performance so indelible that it did more than inflect his star persona; it haunted his career (and, in a way, film itself). She also chronicles Lorre's history as one of Bertolt Brecht's favorite actors, and what the actor brought to the screen from that past. Similarly, Victoria Duckett inverts the common impulse to read a performance in light of the star's biography, instead illuminating how Ingrid Bergman brings the maturity, integrity, and fierceness she demonstrated in her personal life to the role of Karin in *Stromboli* (1950). Duckett discovers precisely how Bergman creates the effect of a perceptive, thinking agent, particularly in so-called quiet moments.

David Desser argues that Setsuko Hara's enigmatic stardom is a result of her enigmatic performances. A star so glamorous and mysterious that she was likened to Greta Garbo, Desser attends closely to Hara in Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953) to reveal that she deliberately crafts ambiguity, drawing us into the intoxicating secrecy of her character. Adrian Danks writes on another actor known for her mysterious charisma, Jeanne Moreau. With François Truffaut's *The Bride Wore Black* (1968) as case study, Danks helps us to understand how Moreau's persona functioned within European modernist cinema and concomitant notions of *modern* performance style, one committed to the "inner rhythms of the movie," to quotidian immediacy, and to sustaining a tension between the sensual and cerebral.

Explicating ways that actors attempt the high-wire act of deliberately deploying the impression of illegibility, or modulating registers of convincingness, emerges as another theme across chapters. A performance can be made deliberately inert, not pointing to the historical world or to the truth of an actor's body (like neorealism) but to storytelling itself, thereby challenging the myth of authenticity upon which traditional film stardom relies. Homer Pettey contends that in Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957), Victor Sjöström conjures an effect of distance and contemplativeness. In turn, these minimalist choices afford a range of responses and interpretations and even inspire Bergman to make directorial choices. But not all actorly restraint distances us. Alexia Kannas argues that Catherine Deneuve's restraint—she cannot, unlike other characters, smile a smile that is "all teeth and gums" in Jacques Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964)—echoes the film's aching refusal of catharsis. Deneuve's expression of not-expressing paradoxically encourages us to invest in Demy's romance even as the character's desire wanes. In a chapter as prismatic as Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love* (2009) itself, Murray Pomerance analyzes the absence of articulateness and explanatory gestures in Tilda Swinton's performance in the film, uncovering the sophistication of her choice to allow context its force. Yet ultimately he leaves its mystery intact, admitting—enjoying—critical loss in the face of the ineffable.

While subtlety and restraint are values often ascribed as honorifics to performances in film criticism, grandness and theatricality—the baroque—can also be vital. Anna Magnani, for example, is famously one of the deftest and most convincing actors in film history. Yet gone are the virtuoso speeches and ferocious depth in Jean Renoir's *The Golden Coach*

(1952), a fact that Sergio Rigoletto believes should invite us to consider the very conscious theatricality in her performance, and even in her stardom. Karla Oeler teaches us that actor Nikolai Cherkasov becomes a screen himself in Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (1945), fulfilling the director's minutest desires by balancing the need for painfully achieved but graphically necessary poses with precariously poised emotional accuracy. Cherkasov demonstrates exemplary Stanislavskian technique in order to manifest an aesthetic of the eccentric, a difficult impression to achieve without falseness. Marcia Landy considers how the very theatricality of Charles Laughton's personality inflects the comic, the melodramatic, even the surreal in David Lean's *Hobson's Choice* (1954). In Landy's view, Laughton's acting style comports with Lean's vision for his genre-blending adaptation.

The description and the described

When describing a character's performed action, we often resist acknowledging the fact that we are already interpreting. It may seem obvious that the actor is sad or afraid or happy, and so, describing a particular aspect of a film may not feel scholarly in the way that pointing out a long take or camera movement might do. However, indicating a long take or camera movement implies that the editing or cinematography could have been otherwise, and critics go on to make something of this choice. Describing an actor's gesture or expression functions similarly: an actor showing his character feeling happy has made precise and articulate choices of posture, gesture, intonation, quality of movement, and so on. The "happiness" doesn't simply happen.

One reason that screen performance receives so little scholarly consideration is that many scholars presume that observing it and writing about it constitute a less rigorous undertaking than, say, noting complicated editing schemes. In order to write about screen performance, the story goes, one need not trouble to acquire more expertise than a typical audience member unthinkingly brings to the screen. There is some truth in this, to the extent that the impulse to mimic being perfectly ordinary, audiences the world over *can* be experts in mimetic performance without additional training. However, it is also true that describing precisely what is to be seen onscreen at a given performative moment is not easy. It is difficult work. The contributors to this volume expose the level of

energy required to appreciate the intricacies of performances, and to thereby create and disseminate the vocabulary necessary for reporting and conversing about the richness of our experiences at the cinema with others. Regardless of the particular style of the actor under scrutiny, there is a notable emphasis throughout this volume on careful attention.

The following chapters do more than insist that actorly gestures matter. By isolating a single performance, authors are able to show how powerful a weapon specificity can be in the attempt to grasp the complex. All gazes are not the same. Playing despair *that* way, without losing all resolve, or playing anger *that* way, so close to tears, invoking a kind of nexus where aesthetics and politics merge. In Isabelle Huppert's work in *The Piano Teacher*, Alison Taylor finds a performance that exceeds what is pointed to by the screenplay. Taylor tackles the difficulty of pitching our critical awareness of Huppert's style, in which impassiveness squares with bald expressivity, sometimes, it seems, at the same time. Timotheus Vermeulen innovates an approach to reading Emma Thompson's performance in *The Remains of the Day* (1993) that demonstrates a method of interpreting a performance that is inherently sketchy, drawn from emotionally gripping, seemingly montaged, moments. Vermeulen argues that changes in rhythm or posture do not signal an inconsistent character or thoughtless choices by the actor, but rather exhibit different ways of being that are not contradictory but very human, and central to the meaning of the film. Aaron Taylor presents an account of Jean-Pierre Léaud in Truffaut's *Stolen Kisses* (1968) that suggests a performer can work in an essayistic register. At a meta-level, Léaud presents an idea of acting as a dangerous, demanding love; rehearsal can seem like an incantation and the craft can create self-delusions.

Actors playing roles in realist fictions in some way cover another way of being in the world. However, writing about performance—the contributors' challenge here—entails balancing one's own real voice with one's imaginative, intellectual, affective engagement with the character, as well as distinguishing the impression of the character's psychology from that of the actor—regardless of whether we wish to believe, or are told, that the actor *really* felt or thought what the character felt or thought during a particular moment. It is easier, of course, to make such distinctions when writing about stars, as the performative choices onscreen become more apparent in contradistinction to the star's other (very often well-known) characters. But the subject of any screen performance is agency, a subject that is blood-close to our hearts. We want to know that we do something,

and (at the risk of stating the obvious) screen performances cultivate concepts of subjectivity. These concepts, in turn, configure ideas of inter-subjectivity. The absorption of screen performances is thus fundamental to the creation of conceptual schemes for thinking about others, for envisaging the social and political spheres in which we see them. Who are these people? Where do they come from and why do they react this way? In short, how do we proceed along the path of life?

Several chapters divulge ways that performances support or subvert socio-political ideologies. For example, Jason Jacobs uncovers how Michael Caine used his voice to soften the provocative (class-based) content of *Alfie*. In turn, the verbal intimacy Caine creates negotiates, even commodifies, a 1960s crisis of masculinity and incidentally changed the picture of the "leading man" in film history. In examining Michel Serrault's work in Édouard Molinaro's *La cage aux folles*, Kyle Stevens also shows that an actor's formal choices can make a political case. In *La cage*, Serrault not only plays an androgynous figure but also creates one formally, by balancing the so-called masculine aggressive-ness of satire with actorly choices that foreground the so-called feminine virtues of nurture and care. Gina Marchetti argues that Maggie Cheung's impeccable turn in Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) offers an idea of what it meant to be a Shanghai expatriate in the 1960s. Cheung's performance, Marchetti writes, brings coherence to the narrative by "concretizing the contradictions" between 1960s Shanghai-Hong Kong society and millennial fin-de-siècle sensibilities associated with global arthouse cinema. Douglas McFarland also argues for the importance of the ways that a performance can embody ideological tensions present in the film at large. He analyzes Toshirô Mifune in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), and how Mifune leads his character to function as a dialectical center so as to echo the story's difficult questions about selfhood, freedom, and tradition.

R. Barton Palmer extols the virtues of Alec Guinness, as evinced most clearly in Henry Cass's *Last Holiday* (1950). Guinness plays the Everyman type, confronting mortality (there's nothing more quotidian than that) with a peculiar calm, an "almost joyful" acquiescence to "existential randomness." Out of such observations, Palmer concludes that an actor can create and embody an aesthetics of poignancy, giving dullness, even pain an appealing, amusing ache. This topic pushes him beyond the text to reflect upon the significance of casting and to relate how a film's production history can contextualize what appears onscreen

in an illuminating way. Hye Seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient also look at an actor's work through the lens of performance history. Their chapter tells us that Choi Min-sik not only clashed violently with director Chan-wook Park during the filming of *Oldboy* (2003), but Min-sik went to extremes that crucially shaped the film: he should be seen as an author of the film through and beyond his performance.

All the world's a screen

The international scope of this project evades narrow notions of realist performances. However, we elected not to include nonrealist or arealist performances, however accomplished, such as the famously and intentionally anemic ones found in Robert Bresson's oeuvre. Nevertheless, a diversity of styles is represented in the following chapters, and across this array emerges the durability of psychological realism in global cinema history. Appreciating that there may simply be a human instinct for mimetic play, one that manifests in the way that people typically enjoy acting out little stories or putting on little voices every day—that we have a sense of performance that is second nature—is not at odds with appreciating screen acting as a serious form of iconic representation. We want to ask how, *exactly,* an actor creates a poetic "I," a position from which to awe, amuse, or berate us. This is rarely simple, of course. Nick Davis considers the counterintuitive quality of Denis Lavant's "surrealist mosaic" of twelve different personae in Leos Carax's *Holy Motors* (2012). Although one might assume that the exposure of Lavant's shape-shifting is alienating, Davis argues that this is not the case. Rather, Lavant and Carax use the display of virtuosity to reflect on the actorly methods that subtend Lavant's career, and to lure the audience into the film's mysteries: mysteries that concern subjectivity, even as the film belongs to a contemporary post-human moment.

Presenting a comprehensible progression of thoughts, desires, and feelings is not limited to a particular register of performance or genre of storytelling. Over the course of the careful readings included here, and through their variety of critical approaches, the fact surfaces that actors do not simply populate our beloved onscreen diegetic worlds; they can play a vital role in the affective and moral intensities of those worlds. They can bestow guilt or redemption, sympathy or repulsion, relief or judgment on characters that may be missing from, or even denied them,

by the script. A movie can hang on the unstated tensions between a character's search for happiness and her own self-destructive impulses. A great performance is thus not just about actorly movement, not just about the visual geometry of figures onscreen, not just about the fact of recorded persons. Effective performances can innovate new subjectivities and generate new levels of compassion for persons, or kinds of persons. On the other hand, performances can also explain something about people, and kinds of people, that we did not know we already knew.

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