Screen Performers Playing Themselves

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Whereas recent commentators have suggested that consumer demand, typecasting and marketing lead performers to maintain continuities across films, I argue that cinema has historically made it difficult to subtract performers from roles, leading to relatively constant comportment, and that casting, marketing and audience preference are not only causes but also effects of this. I do so using thought experiments and empirical experiments, for example, by pondering why people say they see Jesus in paintings of him and rarely mention models, but stress that they see actors when encountering photographic stills of performers portraying him. Arguably, this relates to what photographs have historically come to mean, and these meanings would make it difficult for audiences to subtract and not see the actor. Based on such thinking, along with what filmmakers have said and done, and adding to classic accounts of Cavell, Santayana and others, I build the case that cinematic media invite performers to play themselves.

1. Introduction

Classic commentators have long held that effective screen performers play themselves,[1] thus displaying constant personalities between films. More recent scholars argue otherwise. James Naremore, for example, wrote that 'for me at least, it is usually John Wayne getting onto a horse, seldom Ringo Kid or Ethan Edwards', adding, however, that Wayne himself is 'the product of publicity and various film roles'. He is 'a construction, an image that has an ideological or totemic function'.[2] Paul McDonald similarly suggested that the constancy of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's screen comportment follows from market forces encouraging them to 'use the voice and body to preserve continuities across their most popular and commercially successful roles'.[3] McDonald has further documented instances of delayed dramatic introduction presupposing foreknowledge of star personae in Tom Cruise movies.[4] There are many other instances of stars exhibiting relatively constant comportment between films, as with Woody Allen, Gary Cooper, Bill Murray, Jack Nicholson, James Stewart, Audrey Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, and the list goes on.

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1   Allardyce Nicoll, *Film and Theatre* (London: George Harrap, 1936), 164–191; Erwin Panofsky, 'Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures', in Irving Lavin (ed.), *Three Essays on Style* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995 [1936]), 91–128; Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford: OUP, 1960), 93–132; Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, enlarged edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 25–29.

2   James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 157.

3   Paul McDonald, 'The Story and Show: The Basic Contradiction of Film Star Acting', in Aaron Taylor (ed.) *Theorizing Film Acting* (London: Routledge, 2012), 169–183, at 177.

4   Paul McDonald, *Hollywood Stardom* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 183–191.

So, while it is uncontroversial to claim that screen performers and especially stars maintain constant and hence predictable screen personalities, there is still debate as to why. Perhaps moviegoers pay lip service to versatile acting, but cash for constancy. Maybe filmmakers typecast. Or perhaps constancy, like franchised products, is easily marketed, as Thomas Harris, anticipating more recent scholars who talk about 'star brands',[5] observed over 50 years ago.[6] Yet, without denying this, it may simultaneously be that cinematic media have historically made it difficult for even skilled performers to subtract themselves from roles, leading to reasonably constant comportment; that this constancy has shaped audience preference, casting and marketing; and that together this has encouraged the establishment of star personalities. This is the view I defend.

Now, by 'personality' I do not mean good, bad, hardworking, charitable or John Wayne's darkness in *The Searchers* (dir. John Ford, 1956) compared with his wholesomeness in other films. Rather, I mean ways of using gestures, interacting and speaking, for instance, the way Harrison Ford expresses surprise, befuddlement or sarcasm through facial expressions, body language and intonation. I also mean traits such as Cooper's stalwart reticence, Wayne's wooden gruffness or Woody Allen's neuroticism. It is comparable to how individuals behave differently depending on whether they are at work or a party, yet maintain a fairly constant 'style of comportment', which is another suitable term. Since there is some exaggeration in film—and this in part because performers typically find themselves in situations embellishing the everyday and therefore inviting embellished responses—it might be added that performers often maintain glorified or clichéd versions of their typical comportment.[7]

In light of the ways I use 'personality', I do not expressly challenge those who argue that 'star images' or 'picture personalities' are social, economic and ideological constructions.[8] But I do defend theorists who have lost credibility in some circles, such as Stanley Cavell, treated as naïve by some prominent thinkers,[9] and Allardyce Nicoll and George Santayana, whose work on photography and film is mostly neglected; and while drawing on classic accounts, I introduce original thought and empirical experiments, and examples from the history of film-making. One approach is to clarify how we encounter screen performers by examining what movies have historically meant to us. I also consider how what Cavell and like-minded scholars say about film, photography and acting may become

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5   Ibid., esp. 41–64; Pamela Robertson Wojcik, 'Typecasting', *Criticism* 45 (2003), 223–249.

6   Thomas Harris, 'The Building of Popular Images: Grace Kelly and Marilyn Monroe', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London: Routledge, 1991 [1957]), 40–44, at 41.

7   The notion that performers play 'glorified or clichéd' versions of themselves was suggested in responses given by Daniel Conway and Mark Pearlman during a talk on film and philosophy (Matthew Crippen, 'Performers Playing Themselves: Invitations to a Star System', presented at International Lisbon Conference on Philosophy and Film, Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, 9 May 2014).

8   In addition to those already cited, see Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: Educational Advisory Service, British Film Institute, 1979); and Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

9   Ian Jarvie, *Philosophy of the Film: Epistemology, Ontology, Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 1987), 95–115; Noël Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 41, 66.

outmoded in an increasingly digital age, yet how cinema does not escape its photographic lineage even when it leaves photographic technologies behind.[10]

2. Performer and Role

Unlike film, where we predominantly encounter events through seeing and hearing, Nicoll contended that theatre delivers 'imaginative illusion, the illusion of a period of make-believe'.[11] He did not mean by this that film inevitably shows events that actually happened. However, when we screen *The Empire Strikes Back* (dir. Irvin Kershner, 1980), which tells a borderline preposterous story, the setting of the fictional planet Hoth, with its icy terrain, airspeeders and tauntaun creatures, is delivered to our eyes and ears. By contrast, the setting of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*—a palace in ancient Argos—is rarely created in full detail, with mountains, sea and surrounding city in the background. In this sense, it is not visible on stage, yet the actions and especially words of the performers help us make-believe it is. Hence plays can be, and effectively have been, staged in front of brick walls, whereas something comparable seldom occurs in cinema. Consequently, if the human being is, as André Bazin said, all-important in most stage performances, compared with film where 'the drama … can exist without actors',[12] as in some nature documentaries, it is arguably because performers deliver words to the theatregoers and, in so doing, enable audiences to better imagine worlds.

Perhaps something similar follows in the case of theatre characters. When reading plays—and note that plays are often read, whereas this happens relatively infrequently with screenplays—characters are present to imagination, but not perception. If performers enact plays, does the situation markedly change? This likely assumes too much of a literary understanding wherein theatre is regarded 'as dramatized literature, texts and words',[13] through which we come to imagine events, much as we do when reading novels. Stage performers add a great deal, and characters sometimes seem concretely there on stage, especially during good performances. It is accordingly an overstatement to say that theatre characters are wholly absent to our eyes and ears. Yet it arguably remains so that, in many cases, theatre performers and especially their articulations help us register stories, including characters, in imagination; and to the extent that theatre characters are registered in imagination, it arguably follows they are *separable from the particular performers playing the role*—this is at least what Nicoll's analysis implies. So, while Clytemnestra appears in all parts of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy (albeit as a ghost in the last play), different performers can play the character without difficulty. Were the three plays staged at a festival, each with a different cast, audiences might note it, but would not be unsettled. Just as it is unproblematic if different competent orators recite sections of a novel, few are bothered if different performers play Clytemnestra. Here character is not bound to specific stage performers.

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10   Scott Walden suggests this with photography in 'Objectivity in Photography', *BJA* 45 (2005), 258–272, at 264.

11   Nicoll, *Film and Theatre*, 166.

12   André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 102.

13   Susan Sontag, 'Film and Theater', *Tulane Drama Review* 11 (1966), 24–37, at 27.

By contrast, Nicoll stated that in film 'actor and rôle are indistinguishable',[14] which is to say, screen characters are not easily detached from performers. Were three performers to play Han Solo in the original *Star Wars* trilogy (*Star Wars*, dir. George Lucas, 1977, *Empire Strikes Back*, dir. Irvin Kershner, 1980, *Return of the Jedi*, dir. Richard Marquand, 1983), we would want to say the character called 'Solo' is not the same in all three movies, or the same in name only. Admittedly, different screen performers occasionally do play one character, yet the circumstances tend not to discredit the claim that they are not easily detached from characters. First, some films show characters at different ages, played by young and old performers. But this amounts to two characters: at eighty we are not, as the expression goes, 'the same person' as at ten. Second, performers are occasionally replaced due to unavailability, contract disputes or death. Yet this works only under exceptional circumstances, as when the replacement for Dumbledore was disguised with costume and theatricality, the latter tending to swallow individuality for reasons to be discussed; or when characters are tertiary and filmmakers take special measures, as when mostly shooting Marty's father from behind or upside down and aged with makeup in the second instalment of *Back to the Future* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1989). Third, and more tellingly, there are cases when the 'same' character, played by different performers, reappears—for example, with yet another Batman flick, now with a new leading man. However, here there is little pretence the individuals are the same. The Batman movies of the last decades are typically handled as episodes of an on-going story only when the same performer plays Bruce Wayne. So, while films using the same lead actor as predecessors are constructed like sequels, omitting many expository details of preceding films, most movies introducing new lead actors offer the kind of backstory (e.g. how Batman came to be) expected in first episodes.[15] The name 'James Bond' and '007' are likewise treated more as a rank within MI6 than an individual human being, so that new actors fulfilling the role become new characters. Hence, while these movies revolve around men named Bruce Wayne and James Bond, it is not always the same Wayne and Bond—a position consistent with the thesis that screen performers are bound to characters in ways that stage performers are not.

3. Meaning and Internal Relations

Those attending to photographic bases of cinema often emphasize that film connects to reality in ways that few other arts do, as with Bazin famously declaring that movies 'communicate by way of what is real',[16] and that 'the realism of cinema follows directly from its photographic

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14   Nicoll, *Film and Theatre*, 169.

15   The one exception is *Batman and Robin* (1997), intended as a sequel to *Batman Forever* (1995), where George Clooney replaced Val Kilmer, who abandoned the leading role at the eleventh hour. It is regarded as the worst in the franchise reboot, with an 11% and 28% approval on *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic*, respectively, and the director remarking: 'I just hope when I see a list of the worst movies ever made, we're not on it. I didn't do a good job' (Ramin Setoodeh, 'Q&A: Joel Schumacher on "Batman, Ben Affleck and the Batsuit Nipples"', *Variety*, 11 October 2014; Michael Fleming, 'Helmer's 3rd at Bat', *Variety*, 20 February 1997). While I do not want to claim it failed because the lead actor was changed without introducing expository information that typically accompanies first stories in series, a terribly made film is not a strong counterexample.

16   Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 110.

nature'.[17] Without wholeheartedly endorsing this or reducing film to photography, and without denying that some films—for instance, animated cartoons or the hand-crafted abstract films of Len Lye—have a distinctly unphotographic quality, most can agree that photographic technologies were employed in the first unambiguously identifiable films and the vast majority since. The photographic legacy helps account for the inseparability of performer and character. It does so, in part, because photography helps record levels of detail that make it difficult to bury individual idiosyncrasies, a point I will return to later; it also does so by affecting what it means to encounter people, events and things through the screen, a point I here address.

In *The Photograph and the Mental Image*, prepared for the Harvard Camera Club at some time between 1900 and 1907, Santayana gave one of the earliest philosophical accounts of photography, albeit one currently out of favour. Adopting a pragmatic stance, he compared photography's function with that of other arts. Enumerating popular uses, he cited faithful, visual presentation of persons, wonders and famous works of art. 'Photographs are truly graphic', he wrote, 'there is the unalloyed fact; there is what you would see if you had wings and an infinite circle of acquaintances; there is proof that all they tell us about China or South Africa is no myth.'[18]

History, of course, does not unanimously confirm photography's documentary function. Photographic technologies have produced works resembling impressionist and pointillist paintings, or 'sensory or retinal art' with 'all trace of recognisability removed'.[19] But, despite exceptions, the first and still pervasive function of photography is to document the world. In this, wrote Santayana, photography differs from other media:

> The function of creative art [e.g. theatre, painting, sculpture, poetry] is to interpret experience. Creative art must transform the object, in order to tell us something about it; for an interpretation that merely repeated identical terms of the text would be laughable …Yet this literal repetition makes the success of an art [i.e. photography] whose function is revival.[20]

While overstating the case, since, for example, Ansel Adams' photographs both document and artistically transform the world, whereas found art to some extent repeats it, Santayana's observations have merit. Consider how we relish the way Van Gogh smudged stars into sweeping halos, yet regard as defective aberrated camera lenses that do the same. Painters often idealize, but as Santayana observed, 'when I ask a photograph … to tell me how things look, I do not want that photograph to be retouched or blurred or idealized'.[21] Sometimes photographs are retouched or intentionally blurred, as when hiding facial 'imperfections', but here there is a feeling that something is dishonest and almost unphotographic. This feeling—supposing it is widely shared—suggests photography has ubiquitously been understood as having a documentary function. 'That this is the function of photography',

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17   Ibid., 108.

18   George Santayana, 'The Photograph and the Mental Image', in John Lachs (ed.), *Animal Faith and Spiritual Life: Previously Unpublished and Uncollected Writings of George Santayana with Critical Essays on his Thought* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), 391–403, at 397.

19   William Earle, 'Revolt Against Realism', in Gerald Mast and Marshal Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 3rd edn (Oxford: OUP, 1985), 32–42, at 35.

20   Santayana, 'The Photograph and the Mental Image', 400.

21   Ibid.

Santayana argued, 'is made clear by the use to which it was first put', namely, 'to preserve … images which we most dislike to lose, the images of familiar faces'.[22]

While not mentioning Santayana's work, but drawing heavily on Bazin, Cavell reached comparable conclusions about the function of photography in his 1971 *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, expanded in 1979 to include a new foreword and Cavell's 1974 defence of the book.[23] Cavell began by recounting how Tolstoy's *What is Art?* used to trouble him, and added that 'the book doesn't sound or feel like the work of a crazy man'.[24] This recalls Wittgenstein's avowal that philosophical problems—including those arising from the question 'What is?'—are illusory; they spring from asking questions engendering grammatical misinterpretations, and consequently confused and crazy ways of thinking. Wittgenstein likened these problems to 'illnesses',[25] and prescribed 'therapeutic'[26] and 'analytic'[27] forms of philosophical intervention, comparable to psychoanalysis.[28]

Now, if Cavell's Wittgensteinian background made him wary of Tolstoy's question, it also motivated him to re-examine its meaning. He thus came to see that 'the answer to the question "What is the importance of art?" is grammatically related to, or is a way of answering, the question "What is art?"'[29] Recognizing further that import relates to significance and taking an additional cue from Wittgenstein, who said that 'grammar tells what kind of object anything is',[30] Cavell looked at statements we make about art forms to better understand them, in particular, what it means to encounter forms that we call (categorize as) 'cinematic' and 'photographic'. It is accordingly worth emphasizing that Cavell's conclusions do not follow merely from what photography and cinema physically are. They follow from what they have come to mean to us, which in turn relates to automatism and other physical processes.

So, whereas paintings are views produced and thus interpreted through artists' minds and bodies, Cavell, echoing Bazin,[31] argued that photographs are not in this sense interpretations, being views produced through automated mechanical processes, the camera being 'perfectly dumb' and having 'no conception whatever of its own'.[32] Indeed, were artists to paint with a degree of photorealism matching photography—and some, such as Chuck Close, have come near—many would still, to use Cavell's words, say that a 'painting is a

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22 Ibid., 396.

23 Evan Cameron has pointed to similarities between Cavell and Santayana in conference presentations. For example, Evan Cameron 'Santayana's Missing Pages: Photography and the "Mental Image"', presented to the 2003 annual meeting of the Film Studies Association of Canada, 2003 Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Halifax, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 30 May 2003.

24 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 3.

25 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986 [1953]), §255, 91e.

26 Ibid., §133, 51e.

27 Ibid., §90, 42e–42e.

28 Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Big Typescript', in James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordman (eds), *Philosophical Occasions* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993 [1933]), 160–199, at 163–169.

29 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 4.

30 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §373, 116e.

31 Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, 12–15, 96.

32 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 184.

world [or a creation]; a photograph is of the world'.[33] It might be countered that photographs are not necessarily 'of the world' since they are sometimes manipulated, as when the positioning of the Giza Pyramids was altered to better fit a 1982 cover of *National Geographic*. However, this occurrence and specifically the outcry about it affirms Cavell's position, indicating the image was incongruous with what 'photography' had come to mean. When people understand something to be a photograph, most assume (1) it is 'of the world', that is, it shows something that exists or once existed, and (2) it has been produced through automated mechanical and often electronic processes. These criteria may not be explicitly assumed, but if you see a photograph-like image, then learn objects were moved and digitally altered, you might ask, 'Is this really a photograph?' and 'Are these objects real?' Having such thoughts, Cavell wrote: 'A photograph does not present us with "likenesses" of things; it presents us, we want to say, with the things themselves'.[34]

To say, '"Photographs present us with the things themselves" sounds, and ought to sound, false or paradoxical', conceded Cavell, and yet 'it is no less paradoxical or false to hold up a photograph of Garbo and say, "That is not Garbo"'.[35] The photograph may be grainy and black and white, but were we to peer at Garbo through pitted, darkened glass, we would not say, 'We are not seeing Garbo'. The photograph constrains us to an immobile view, but the same might be achieved were we restrained. While long focal lengths compress Garbo's features, the same would occur if we were to gaze at her through a telescope, and we would not conclude that we are not seeing Garbo.[36] The suggestion that photographic images are perceived as two-dimensional is questionable. Yet, if we removed depth cues, such as retinal disparity and motion parallax by closing one eye and remaining motionless, and eliminated oculomotor input by standing sufficiently far away, we would not deny we are seeing Garbo. A conventional photograph freezes Garbo, but motion photography answers even this objection. In short, adjusting lighting, filters, lenses, film stocks and angles changes conditions under which subjects are photographed, but resulting photographs or films remain views mediated through automated machinery, not imagination, and most take for granted that when they look at a photograph that they are seeing what exists or once existed.[37] 'That the [photographed] world is of a past world that does not exist (now) is its only difference from reality',[38] said Cavell. This means that 'the camera provides views of reality only on the assumption that we normally do, apart from the camera, see reality, i.e., see live persons and real things in actual spaces'.[39]

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33   Ibid., 24.

34   Ibid., 17.

35   Ibid., 17.

36   For contrasting position, see Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 40, 57–58.

37   Kendal L. Walton offers a comparable defence against thinkers such as H. Gene Blocker ('Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism', *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984) 246–247, at 261; H. Gene Blocker, 'Pictures and Photographs', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (1977), 155–162, at 158).

38   Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 24. Cavell here departed from Bazin. Whereas the latter suggested that film puts us in the presence of performers (*What is Cinema*, 97), Cavell indicated, in the above cited passage, that film allows us to see performers despite their material absence, and reaffirmed this when he wrote that the 'presence' of objects on the screen 'refers to their absence, their location in another place' (*The World Viewed*, xvi).

39   Ibid., 192–193; Walton, 'Transparent Pictures', 146–162.

To better understand Cavell's position and what it has historically meant to encounter things through photographs and implications for screen acting, consider paintings of Jesus versus photographic stills of actors playing him. In informal experiments, viewers were first shown two paintings of Jesus in which he does not even look the same, and when asked whom the paintings are of, viewers unhesitatingly responded, 'Jesus'. However, when shown the photographic stills, they immediately claimed it was not Jesus, but actors playing the role. So in the first instance they identified one individual, namely, Jesus; in the latter, up to three: the two actors, plus the role they were playing.[40] People were clearly hesitant to say that they saw Jesus in the stills because it was evident the person in the photograph cannot be Jesus, which suggests the people posing cannot be subtracted from their roles. But on the face of it, paintings should not be any different since nobody knows what Jesus looked like and people in the photographs could have just as easily modelled for a painter. So why the difference?

An answer lies in our concepts of photographs and paintings. By way of comparison, Cavell suggested that upon encountering a painting of a building, we take for granted that the building may be a product of imagination and may therefore have never existed.[41] The painting does not testify to the building's existence; we acquire such knowledge through external information, as when recognizing it as one visited before. This is why Cavell said it only 'accidentally' makes sense to ask what stands or once stood behind a building in a painting.[42] However, the question is appropriate when directed towards photographs because of what 'photography' has come to mean. The word 'photograph' has historically indicated an object showing things that exist or once existed. Thus, when we understand we are encountering a photograph as opposed to a realistic looking painting or digitally doctored image, we take for granted that the building exists or once did.

Paintings of Jesus, therefore, are straightforward because audiences at least tacitly recognize that they might be works of imagination, so that even if models were used, the paintings are still of Jesus and only accidentally of models. As above, audiences can only know models were used through information external to paintings, say, remarks in an artist's diary. By contrast, the actors are internally related to the photographic stills. Much as 'bachelor' analytically implies 'unmarried man', 'photograph' *means* an 'object that shows things that exist or once existed'. Inasmuch as viewers understand they are encountering photographic stills, they feel certain they are seeing actors, who accordingly cannot easily be subtracted.

Just as actors cannot be subtracted from photographic stills of them playing Jesus, screen performers are not easily subtracted from characters. Rick, the leading character in *Casablanca* (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942), exists because Bogart existed; because of the 'merciless mechanism' of the camera,[43] mannerisms that make Bogart 'who he is' largely make Rick 'who he is', and, although Rick is conceptually distinguishable from Bogart, moviegoers seeing Rick inescapably see Bogart. Indeed, much of the motivation for attending

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40   Matthew Crippen, 'Pictures, Experiential Learning and Phenomenology', in András Benedek and Kristof Nyiri (eds), *Visual Learning*, Vol. 5, *Saying by Showing, Showing by Saying – Pictures, Parables, Paradoxes* (Oxford: Peter Lang Publishers, 2015), 83–90, at 84–85.

41   Ibid., 23–24.

42   Ibid., 23.

43   Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, quoting René Clair, 94.

films originates from a desire to see how particular performers will act when thrust into particular roles or situations. Many moviegoers are as interested in the star as the character played; many attend because they admire the lead performer, and in this light Cavell said, 'the screen performer is essentially not an actor at all: he *is* the subject of study'.[44]

An additional point the photograph versus painting examples help clarify is how heavily made-up or costumed performers can disappear into roles. For instance, in the *Star Trek* series *Deep Space Nine*, J. G. Hertzberg portrayed a Klingon and a Changeling, and different actresses played the Cardassian Ziyal. Here few are likely to notice one actor playing different characters in the first instance and different actresses the same character in the second. A comparable but less striking case is Michael Gambon taking over the role of Dumbledore from the late Richard Harris in the last six *Harry Potter* films (dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2004; dir. Mike Newell, 2005; dir. David Yates, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011). Though far from seamless, by comparison it would have been much more difficult to replace the performer playing Harry Potter without a back story, likely involving magic, detailing how, in effect, a new person and thus new character had appeared. A possible explanation for these disappearances into roles is this: in addition to the roles being theatrical and thus exaggerated, which, for reasons to be discussed, buries individuality, and the obvious fact that the performers were disguised, it may be as if viewers see something akin to paintings or sculptures. This is particularly so in the *Star Trek* examples where faces of performers are literally sculpted with prosthetics. As with paintings—not to mention sculptures—of Jesus, which are only accidentally of models, audiences may, in these specialized cases, see characters first and performers only accidentally.

4. Performers Playing Themselves

An American in Paris (dir. Vincente Minnelli, 1951) is set shortly after World War II. Gene Kelly played Jerry, a retired American soldier pursuing a career as a painter. Leslie Caron played Lise, a Parisian teenager working in a boutique. Notice that while both Kelly and Caron were dancers, Jerry and Lise are not. How might a 1951 audience react when these two characters performed carefully choreographed sets? Few would be surprised with Kelly. He was famous for dancing in other movies, and, irrespective of his character, most would expect him to dance. Caron was a different matter. She was new to the screen.

With these thoughts, the filmmakers introduced Kelly and Caron differently. Kelly first appears not as a dancer, but as Jerry the ex-soldier and struggling artist. No indication is given that Kelly will dance, and it is almost fifteen minutes before he performs his first number. By contrast, Caron is initially encountered as a dancer when her character's fiancé describes her, and she appears as if imagined in the mind's eye, dancing in dreamy vignettes personifying aspects of her. As the screenwriter Alan Jay Learner recollected:

> We weren't worried about people accepting Gene Kelly as a dancer, because nobody is surprised when he dances. But, if there is some character on the screen for twenty

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44   Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 28.

minutes, and, if they then suddenly break into dance, the audience might say, 'Hey, wait, who is that? What's happening here?' With Leslie Caron, who was a beautiful dancer, I felt it was important that you see her dance before you know anything more about her.[45]

Learner's remarks affirm that a performer's history on the screen—or lack of it—influences what the performer is for audiences and hence their expectations. This reinforces a central point: that performer and character are not easily detached in film. Again, we can abstractly separate the two and indeed do when we say Kelly is a dancer, while Jerry is not. But, as Learner's remarks indicate, 1951 moviegoers knew Kelly from other films and were not likely to separate this past Kelly from the Kelly they encounter in the role of Jerry. Most would accordingly assume he would do what he had long done on and off the screen: dance.

A possibility mentioned at the outset is that screen performers such as Gene Kelly, Humphrey Bogart and Tom Cruise are established and maintained as known individuals through marketing, and marketing surely plays a role. Yet lesser known performers having limited sales value—for example, Molly Parker, Gary Busey and S. Z. Sakall—still exhibit similar comportment between films. But suppose lesser-known performers regularly shifted comportment styles—and occasionally they do. Although consistent with marketing explanations, this might also suggest performers are more credible when playing themselves, thus more successful and hence stars. At the same time, if virtually all play themselves, including obscure performers, this might simply show that when some Jane Doe credibly personifies some character, filmmakers and marketers—not to mention audiences—envisage her in similar roles and cast accordingly. However, while explaining why performers maintain constant screen comportment, this would not account for Jane Doe's first credible performance. Perhaps it was a good day, or perhaps she had recently acquired new skills—in short, conditions were such that she might have convincingly rendered any number of personifications, therewith setting any number of paths for future recasting. Indeed, maybe she is still capable of a variety of comportments, but denied opportunities by casting departments. That said, perhaps that first convincing performance arose because Jane Doe was playing herself, in which case the constancy of her comportment in later films is not accidental.

The problem can be approached by yet another comparison between film and theatre. In plays theatregoers typically encounter exaggerated tones and gestures. Yet few perceive this as overacting because their position is comparable to listeners attending public orations of novels. Listeners must hear and comprehend orators, and embellished tones and gestures help make audible the grammar and punctuation that bolster the legibility of written language: 'The first desideratum of the [stage] actor is that he must be distinctly seen and heard'.[46] We see, then, that theatre invites performers to act in ways that people normally do not in everyday life. This requires training, for instance, in voice delivery. This explains why professional quality plays are rarely staged with untrained performers playing themselves.

So what we observe on stage is almost never intended to be a facsimile of the everyday world because performers are typically not there to produce the realities of the story in

45   Quoted in Donald Knox, *The Magic Factory: How MGM Made An American in Paris* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), 131.

46   Vsevolod Pudovkin, 'Film Acting', in his *Film Technique and Film Acting*, ed. and trans. Ivor Montagu (New York: Grove Press, 1970 [c. 1930]), 229–371, at 232.

tangible space, but, for want of better terms, to convey realities to the imagination of listeners. Film is different. Just as calling people 'theatrical' implies that they are ostentatious and fake, 'that which [sounds] exactly right when delivered on the boards of the theatre ... [is] ridiculous, false and absurd when associated with the screen picture'.[47] The reasons for this are varied, but among them is that the camera shows details mostly missed in theatre and sometimes in everyday life. Hence Siegfried Kracauer, quoting filmmaker René Clair, said that 'the slightest exaggeration of gesture and manner of speaking is captured by the merciless mechanism';[48] and this, Kracauer went on to explain, anticipating Cavell,

> accounts for Hitchcock's insistence on 'negative acting ... '. 'I mustn't act', as Fredric March put it. To be more precise, the film actor must act as if he did not act at all but were a real-life person caught in the act by a camera. He must seem to *be* his character. He is in this sense a photographer's model.[49]

Other filmmakers have repeated the sentiment. Director Frank Capra said: 'Convince the actors they are real flesh and blood beings living a story. Once the actors are themselves convinced, then, hopefully, they will convince the audience'.[50] The idea is to get performers to respond to fictional situations as they conceivably might were they really in them—and notice that because cinematic situations often depart from everyday life, so too can performers' responses. Hence carving swathes of blood in the lightly comedic violence-packed world of James Bond does not lead to tears and PTSD.

This also helps explain why acclaimed films have been made with non-professionals playing themselves. *The Bicycle Thief* (dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1947), which has the distinction of earning a special Academy Award before 'foreign film' was a category, exemplifies this. The film was shot on location in post-World War II Rome and is about day-to-day struggles there. Thus the non-actors in leading roles, who were convincing, not only had the advantage of playing themselves, but of playing to realities they lived. This rectifies a possible misunderstanding. The tendency of screen performers to play themselves and the possibility of making credible films with non-professionals does not imply that professionals lack talent or skill. When Bogart played a detective or a smuggler, he imaginatively and engagingly situated himself in circumstances that he had not experienced, and not everybody can do this. So, even if esteemed screen performers and especially stars are 'non-actors', as Cavell,[51] Kracauer[52] and others have stated, probably exaggerating the case, acting without seeming to or 'negative acting' is not necessarily unskilled. Cynthia Baron has documented comments of acting coaches, performers and filmmakers from the Hollywood studio era attesting to this,[53] though her conclusion that most Hollywood

47 Nicoll, *Film and Theatre*, 173.

48 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 94.

49 Ibid., 94–95.

50 Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 64.

51 Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 28.

52 Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 99.

53 Cynthia Baron, 'Crafting Film Performances: Acting in the Hollywood Studio Era', in Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer (eds), *Screen Acting* (London: Routledge, 1999), 31–45.

performers consequently did not play themselves can be questioned since it follows from her defining 'playing themselves' as 'unskilled'.[54]

The disparate functions of stage and screen performers bestow different constraints and possibilities. Kracauer and numerous others have suggested that film shows and even exaggerates subtle aspects of performance, and Vsevolod Pudovkin observed that exaggeration on stage drowns gradations of individuality: 'The broader an acting gesture, the less it can be shaded. The more intensified the actor's tones, the more difficult for him to transmit to the spectator the finer shades of his voice'.[55] It is likely false that intensified tones necessarily keep performers from transmitting finer shades and subtlety, but it is plausible that it at least allows for the possibility of swamping individual idiosyncrasies. This would in turn allow stage performers to play a variety of substantially different personages.

With most screen performers, however, individuality is typically not swamped in embellishment to the same degree. Performers accordingly remain freer to express gradations of individual style, specifically their own. However, this makes it difficult to adopt other comportment styles: first, because performers cannot easily abandon or bury idiosyncrasies; and, second, because shifting to a new style is not, as in theatre, a relatively manageable affair—at least to those with training and skill—of adopting broad, boldly defined traits. Reinforcing this position and echoing Erwin Panofsky, Cavell observed that a stage performer

> works himself into a role. … In this respect, a role in a play is like a position in a game, say, third base: various people can play it, but the great third baseman is a man who has accepted and trained his skills and instincts most perfectly and matches them most intimately with his discoveries of the possibilities and necessities of third base. On the stage there are two beings, and the being of the character assaults the being of the actor; the actor survives only by yielding.[56]

That is, stage performers flourish by succumbing and being swallowed by roles, whereas screen performers often excel by emphatically manifesting individual comportment styles and personality regardless of the particular character.

Exceptions of course exist, sometimes because of extraordinary skill, but also because performers occasionally play characters having a theatrical nature. Alec Guinness, for example, often got swallowed by his characters to such a degree that one might ask, 'That's Guinness?', upon encountering him in a heretofore unseen film. But then Guinness began his career on the stage and often played movie characters who are expected to use exaggerated oratory and gestural styles, for instance, politicians, military leaders and priests. To the extent that exaggeration buries individual idiosyncrasies, he faced a relatively manageable affair. Meryl Streep, especially famous for the diversity of her characterizations, has also played roles inviting exaggerated oratory and mannerisms. She played politicians in *The Iron Lady* (dir. Phyllida Lloyd, 2011) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 2004), an affected actress and television personality in *Death Becomes Her* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1992) and *Julie and Julia* (dir. Nora Ephron, 2009), a domineering Southerner in *August: Osage County* (dir. John Wells,

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54   Ibid., 31.

55   Pudovkin, *Film Acting*, 233.

56   Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 27–28.

2013), a nun and school principal in *Doubt* (dir. John Patrick Shanley, 2008) and a woman using the cautious, stilted intonation of one speaking English as a second language in *Sophie's Choice* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1982). *Out of Africa* (dir. Sydney Pollack, 1985) is a period piece in which upper-class people enunciate carefully and exaggerate mannerisms. It might be added that Streep's diversity is marketed as a constant in her performances, perhaps embellishing our perception of it. But more to the point, Guinness and Streep, insofar as they are violations of the rule, are exceptions that demonstrate the general rule of constant comportment in film. In most other cases, variation between films is analogous to everyday life where we behave differently depending on whether we are at a funeral, a pub or a job interview, yet retain the same basic self-identifying mannerisms, intonations and comportment.

5. Conclusion

I began this paper by listing common explanations of why screen performers and especially stars tend to play themselves:

1. Perhaps moviegoers pay cash for constancy.
2. Perhaps filmmakers compel performers to repeat similar roles.
3. Perhaps constant comportment is amenable to marketing.

These factors are not mutually exclusive, and I suggested all are at play. I added, however, that these factors might be more effects than causes. That is, I defended the thesis advanced by Cavell, Nicoll and others—but disputed by the likes of Noël Carroll[57]—that cinematic media makes it difficult for performers to detach themselves from roles; that it consequently invites performers to play themselves; and that the above-mentioned factors would be present in far lesser degree if cinema had not historically done this. I will review what has been affirmed.

First, Nicoll observed that while many 'complain that [a performer] is the same in every screen-play', this 'is exactly what cinema demands'. He added:

> On stage we rejoice, or should rejoice in a performer's versatility; in the cinema unconsciously we want to feel that we are witnessing a true reproduction of real events, and consequently we are not so much interested in discerning a player's skill in diversity of character building.[58]

Thus, if moviegoers financially reward performers who play themselves, they arguably do so for aesthetically justifiable reasons. As Andrew Klevan elaborated in a chapter on Cavell, who here agreed with Nicoll, 'in the best Hollywood films, character and performer are inextricably intertwined—they coalesce: James Stewart is George Bailey; George Bailey is James Stewart'.[59]

Second, two performers—even of the same 'type'—will not be comparable in all respects, and screenplays that work for one may not for the other. Consequently filmmakers

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57   Carroll, *Theorizing the Moving Image*, 66–70.

58   Nicoll, *Film and Theatre*, 172.

59   Andrew Klevan, 'Guessing the Unseen from the Seen: Stanley Cavell and Film Interpretation', in Russell B. Goodman (ed.), *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 118–139, at 126.

often cast individually. Sometimes they also write or rework scripts for specific perform-ers—something that only occasionally happens in theatre. As Capra remarked: 'I constantly change things. I change my conception of the characters when the cast comes in. When Gary Cooper steps into a part, that part has to be tailored to Gary Cooper. Each actor brings in his own particular clout'.[60] Performers too adjust scripts, sometimes making suggestions, more typically through spontaneous improvisations. Notice also that scripts do not work as well when not tailored, or when performers are not granted freedom to make adjustments. One suspects, for example, that Harrison Ford's character in the first *Star Wars* (dir. George Lucas, 1977) movie was modelled after Bogart's in *To Have and Have Not* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1944). Both are smugglers. Both are reluctant heroes who claim they are in it for the money, not the cause, but who both succumb to the cause and women involved in it. Both have exceedingly loyal first mates. Both even shoot an enemy from under a table. In itself none of this is problematic. What possibly is, is that Ford may have tried or been asked, in effect, to play Bogart in the first film. In the next two, his character was closer to the screen persona he would exhibit in most of his later movies, at which point his performance improved.

Third, while individuals with constant screen comportment have historically been highly marketable, performers such as James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, Katharine Hepburn and Ingrid Bergman are marketable largely because they deliver outstanding performances and do so with individual charisma. Of course, the absence of marketing has left excellent performers obscure, and its presence promoted poor ones. Factors unrelated to acting ability, such as sex appeal, have also elevated performers, including those just listed. However, none of this repudiates the claim that highly credible performers often play themselves, and credible performers are, if all else is equal, more marketable than non-credible ones. So yes, marketers prefer performers playing themselves, but this is partly because credible performers are easier to sell.

Filmmaking is, of course, changing and will change further. Yet art forms do not easily abandon historical legacies even when relinquishing old modes of production. For instance, the photographic legacy is felt even in cartoons, inasmuch as animators import editing and 'shooting' styles from mainstream filmmaking. It is also felt in digitally constructed moving images. As John Mullarkey noted: 'lens flare—an *artifact* of "conventional" filmmaking that was once avoided but eventually became a stylistic cliché of the 1960s and 1970s—is these days reproduced artificially' in computer-generated productions.[61] This 'shortfall from perfection' stands as 'one attempt to emulate the imperfections of the optical *in order to be real*—its flaring, its blurriness'.[62] In line with this, the makers of *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009) digitally manufactured lens flare and blurriness, limited depth of field and made bright skies and sunlight on jungle leaves appear overexposed. The production team, moreover, went to great lengths to help both the director and audience feel as if conventional cameras were employed. Joe Letteri, a visual effects supervisor, explained that a 'whole system' was 'set up to allow Jim, as a director, to walk onto the stage as if

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60   Frank Capra, 'Frank Capra, Director', in Evan Cameron (ed.), *Sound and the Cinema* (New York: Redgrave, 1980), 77–84, at 82.

61   John Mullarkey, *Philosophy and the Moving Image: Refractions of Reality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 54.

62   Ibid., 195.

it were a live action stage, pick up the camera, see his actors, see his characters, see his world'. Rob Legato, a virtual cinematography consultant, added: 'And the camera can do anything. It can be a crane, it can be a steady-cam, it can be all just purely handheld. … It's basically as close to live action as one can get in a CG invented world'.[63]

Notice that while the virtual camera can, as Legato put it, 'do anything', the production team adopted a style that mostly mimics constraints of conventional cameras, and introduced optical imperfections associated with them. In terms of performance capture, they limited themselves similarly. As director James Cameron explained:

> We got the best animators in the world to take all this data, which was coming from our performance capture. Then we limited their options to things that were value added like [motions of] the [non-human] tails and ears. So they took a human performance, with no diminishment whatsoever, and then added to it. So, when people ask me what percentage of the actor's performance came through in the final character, I say 110%.[64]

New technologies have produced computer-generated facsimiles convincing enough to trick would-be child-abusers on the Internet,[65] and recently performance capture combined with a body double was used to create a fairly convincing young Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator Genisys* (dir. Alan Taylor, 2015). Yet capturing performances with conventional cameras and recording devices may for some time remain easier and more effective than constructing micro-movements of muscle, tone, line, shadow and countless other alterations rippling through the human face, as evidenced by the fact that although Schwarzenegger's young face was impassive because he was meant to be a cyborg, performance capture was still used and was 'incredibly labor-intensive … and time consuming'.[66] As long as conventional recording techniques remain easier, more effective and less expensive, the case made in this article should continue to hold.[67]

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63 The above passages are quoted from the documentary *Avatar: Creating The World of Pandora* (dir. Thomas C. Crane, 2010).

64 These remarks are from a 12 January 2010 interview that aired on Discovery, *Avatar: Interview with James Cameron* (12 January 2010) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vt-XCDjyDNs>.

65 Frank Furedi, 'Paedophile Hunting and "Sweetie": The Case for Luring Potential Criminals?', *The Independent*, 5 November 2013.

66 Mark Hughes, 'Talking "Terminator Genisys" with VFX Supervisor Sheldon Stopsack', *Forbes*, 19 November 2015.

67 My thinking on film owes a profound debt to Evan Cameron, who supervised me through three degrees and has continued to be a friend and mentor since. I would also like to thank Jeanette Bicknell who read and commented on early drafts of this article and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.