The Camera, the Actor, and the Audience

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The following is from a forthcoming book entitled, *Film versus Stage Acting: A Phenomenological Approach.*

The camera is not an audience. The early French filmmaker Méliès made movies that were essentially filmed plays. He thus identified the camera with the potential spectators, placing it immobile in a position equivalent to the best seat in a theatre. Other filmmakers quickly dropped the practice, however, giving us the mobile, constantly changing camera angles that we still have today. The audience rarely identifies with the camera, while the actor does not relate to it as he does to a theatre audience.

The camera is a machine that records everything that comes through its lens. Ingrid Bergman called the camera her "friend."[1] For her, an actress who was infinitely photogenic, this was certainly true. A heavy-smoking, hard-drinking woman with occasional weight problems, she nonetheless managed to look forever young, fresh, beautiful, intelligent, and charming on the screen. But there is a deeper sense in which the camera loves *everybody*. As Michael Caine remarks:

> The camera doesn't have to be wooed; the camera already loves you deeply. Like an attentive mistress, the camera hangs on your every word, your every look; she can't take her eyes off you. She is listening to and recording everything you do, however minutely you do it; you have never known such devotion.[2]

Another way of putting it might be that the camera dotes on the actor the way a mother dotes on her child, regardless of whether it is beautiful, ordinary-looking, or ugly. The actor does not have to *earn* the camera's attention, the way he has to earn the attention of a theatre audience. The camera will faithfully record whatever he does, good, bad, or indifferent.

The stage actor feeds off the audience, needing it to ensure that the performance is for keeps, knowing that the role will be good or bad forever in the memories of people who have paid to watch. One might think, therefore, that for a film actor to have the camera as an enthusiastic, undiscriminating audience would be exhilarating, but it has the opposite effect. It is like having an opening night theatre audience of family and friends. They do not miss a word or a piece of business, love everything they see, laugh and applaud loudly, but for the actor their reactions are hollow,

meaningless. Since they would react in the same manner regardless of the quality of the play, they do not validate the performance the way an ordinary, paying audience might. Similarly, the camera records a film actor's performance, but does not validate it.

In fact, film acting, no matter how good, remains largely unvalidated for the actor, which is the reason film acting is ultimately less satisfying than acting for a live audience. Esther Rolle, the distinguished African-American actress best known for playing the mother on the television sitcom *Good Times*, remarked that, "You need Hollywood for survival, and you need theater for inner survival and revival. It rejuvenates you. I love live audiences. You get feedback. I'm still scared to death of cameras."[3]

The film's director, of course, is among other things a surrogate audience, as a stage director is during rehearsals in the theatre. But there have been great directors who were notoriously stingy with praise for their actors, like Alfred Hitchcock or William Wyler. (Charlton Heston said that Wyler "was just not interested in making you feel good. He was only interested in making you *be* good.")[4] Such directors may not even coach their actors at all, except on technical matters such as where to stand. This is especially true for television drama, where there is often no time for coaching.

Even when a director is verbally responsive, he is hardly a disinterested spectator. His bread and butter depend on getting good performances from the actors, so that his reactions will always have an ulterior motive, even when honest. The actor, sensing that the director's reactions are not entirely up front, will never feel the same about his praise as about the cheers, laughter, or even stunned silence, of a real audience. Far worse, however, are directors who are abusive. Filmmaking is frustrating, timetables are tight, and large amounts of money are at risk. Some directors vent their frustration on the hapless actors, not helping them to be good (they are paid to be good, it is expected of them), but disparaging them when they seem bad. Actors would rather confront a hostile theatre audience armed with rotten tomatoes than have to face such vituperation. Stage directors can be abusive too, but the blessing is that they cannot abuse you during an actual performance, while the film director is right there, behind the camera, for every take.

Beyond the director, the film actor can look to reactions from others working on the film; from studio executives; from PR people; from critics; from family and friends. Again, none of these is disinterested, so none really counts. Actual audience reaction comes only in the form of box office receipts and fan mail; the former may have nothing to do with the value of the particular actor's performance, while the latter, again, comes with an underlying agenda. The fan is not laughing or applauding anonymously in a theatre, but is instead asking for recognition, looking for validation himself. Most actors actually dislike getting fan mail.

Finally, the film actor can always look to *herself* to determine whether her performance was working, whether it was truly effective. Watching one's own performance on film, however, is a strange and confusing experience. It is just about impossible to get an objective view of it. As a writer, I usually have difficulty evaluating my own writing; the same passage can alternately seem wonderful or horrible, though in actuality it is probably somewhere in between. Most writers report similar reactions. Watching my own filmed performance as an actor, however, is even worse. It is me and it is not me. Because it is my performance, I tend to watch it too much, separated from the movie as a whole, and to be hypercritical. It seems all in pieces—look at that terrible gesture, that corny bit of business, listen to that phony line reading. The sound of my voice is unlike the one I hear in my own head—and for some reason, everyone who ever heard a recording of his voice thinks it sounds not just different but worse. As a writer, I can at least rewrite something I dislike, but scenes in a film are rarely reshot—certainly not in order to please a fussy actor! But even if I could talk the director into reshooting, I would probably be equally dissatisfied when watching the new takes. Oddly enough, a performance in the theatre, verified by good audience reactions, seems more real, more valid, than seeing myself on screen, even though in the theatre I can see myself only through the eyes of others. Some film actors never look at their rushes, nor even their finished films. It is impossible, in the theatre, similarly to avoid the audience, but there has never been an actor who wanted to.

The audience at a live theatrical performance is very aware of being an audience. Until late in the nineteenth century, the audience was always illuminated, out of necessity. Many traditional theatres were out of doors, where of course sunlight could not be dimmed. (It is interesting that, at the newly reconstructed Elizabethan Globe Theatre in London, the audience is actually *better* illuminated than the actors.) Indoor theatres, lit by candles or oil lamps, had no convenient way of dimming the lights in the auditorium; besides, since the primary goal of theatrical lighting was usually to provide as much illumination as possible on the actors, the lighting in the auditorium augmented the relatively meager illumination on the stage. Thus, actors could easily see the audience, while audience members could see one another. There was a strong feeling of a shared experience in the theatre.

With the arrival of gas lighting, dimming the auditorium became easy, and also economical, saving some of the expense of the gas. Later, electrical lighting meant that auditorium lighting could be turned off entirely. With lighting intensity onstage greatly increased, using light from the audience area to augment the stage lighting was not only unnecessary, it came to seem distracting. Audiences got used to sitting in the dark, a practice that continued in movie theatres.

Nevertheless, although both theatre and movie audiences usually sit in the dark nowadays, the feeling of being an audience member at a stage play is very different from that at a movie. Notice, for example, how awkward and unusual it

feels to watch a play as part of a small, scattered audience, in contrast to the same situation in a movie theatre, where it feels normal. Conversely, a full house at a play is a delight for both actors and audience, while a full movie theatre seems distracting and irritating. (I prefer to eat my popcorn in peace, without some stranger intruding on my space.) This difference is the result of the actors being present during a stage performance and absent from the movie theatre. When the actors are physically present, we like to feel part of a group reacting to them, even though we may be sitting anonymously in the dark. They hear our reactions, and we know they hear them; we develop camaraderie like spectators at a football game, cheering on the actors less blatantly but no less intensely. But when we cannot relate directly to the actors, we prefer not to relate to one another, either.

Notice, too, how videos of movies are regularly sold or rented in the millions every week, while videos of stage productions rarely even exist. Watching a movie at home on your television may reduce the spectacle, but the essentials of the experience are still there. It still feels like watching a movie, an isolated, private experience. Watching a video of a stage play seems like a secondary encounter at best, a stale abstraction. In logical, businesslike terms, videos of plays would make more sense than videos of movies, since plays are much more expensive when seen in a theatre than movies are and, in any case, are available to theatregoers in one city only. (Even when productions tour, the vast majority of people will never be able to see them, even if they could afford the price of a ticket.) Yet there is no market for videos of plays, not even of big hits. Only a dyed-in-the-wool theatre buff would buy a video of a play, and then only as a means of trying to imagine what it was actually like to be there in the theatre. A video of a movie remains a movie; a video of a play is a mere archive.

The fact that a movie audience cannot relate directly to live actors does not mean that they do not identify with them. Indeed, such identification is an essential part of the movie-watching experience, much more so than the identification felt in watching live actors. It is important, again, to recognize that movie audience members do *not* identify with the camera, which would be the equivalent of theatre audience members identifying with one another. Most of the time, members of the movie audience are unaware that the camera even exists.

From time to time, filmmakers use what is known as a point-of-view (POV) shot, taken from the point of view of one of the characters. The convention is that when we see a character looking off, out of frame, the next shot shows what he sees. Occasionally, whole scenes, and sometimes even whole films, have been shot as POV, but they have rarely been successful. The medium resists identification with the camera. Even when POV is done in the standard way, establishing a character looking off camera, if the POV shot goes on at any length, the editor will typically intercut more shots of the observing character, to remind the audience that they are looking through her eyes. A POV shot may even employ a framing

device—binoculars, foliage, a window—but the frame quickly becomes just part of the environment unless measures are taken to remind us of the POV, such as voiceover dialog by the observer. Otherwise, we are again drawn to what is depicted, particularly if it is another character. For the audience, the camera is like a lodestone that magnetizes something and then is thrown away. We are drawn to the magnetized object, but without considering how or why.

In general, then, the camera *disappears* for the movie audience. This is why filmmakers go to great lengths not to draw attention to it. It is the rule, for example, that no one being filmed may look directly into the camera, not even an extra in a crowd scene. The rare moments when this rule is broken—in Woody Allen's films, for example, where he will suddenly address the audience—are so disruptive as to amount to a special effect. You are suddenly jolted out of the imaginary world of the movie into the workaday world of filmmaking, an experience that can be hilarious, but also disturbing. Of course you know all along that you are watching a movie, but to have the movie *remind* you of it is another matter. What was supposed to be a background truth has moved front and center, making you feel embarrassed, as if caught daydreaming.

Finally, the camera can reimpose itself into the audience's consciousness through its imaginative, artistic use. Odd camera angles, canted framing, flaring the lens, handheld shots (before the days of the steadicam), montage sequences, superimpositions, whip panning, zooming, etc. make us aware that we are watching a movie, that what we are seeing was photographed by a director and a director of photography (DP). These are exceptions that prove the rule. If the camera were always foregrounded in our consciousness, such effects would have no impact. Indeed, camera tricks for their own sake are irritating, breaking our mood without adding anything to the drama. Only when we are caught up in the dramatic action does artistic camerawork enhance the aesthetic experience. It is a metadramatic device like Woody Allen suddenly addressing the audience calling attention to the fact that we are watching a movie; all such devices work only when the movie is a good one, engrossing us so that when the illusion is broken we are both disturbed and pleased by the sudden shift in perspective.

One of the ironies of filmmaking is that, while the camera will vanish for the audience, it is always central to the consciousness of the actor and the entire film crew. Everyone on a film set knows where the camera is located and is constantly thinking about it. If a shot uses more than one camera, everyone knows where every single one has been placed. And everyone certainly knows whether or not a camera is running. The moment when a director calls for the camera to start is an awesome one, like the opening kickoff in a football game, when you realize that, after long and difficult preparation, you are at last playing for keeps. There are occasional anecdotes about directors tricking the actors by running the camera without their knowledge, but these are also exceptions that prove the rule. A director

pretends to have a "rehearsal," but secretly tells the camera operator to start filming, or he tells the camera operator to keep filming after a scene is ostensibly over. It is a drastic deception, used to catch the actors off guard, to make them act more naturally. It would never be necessary if the presence of a running camera were not normally so impressive.

What does the actor actually think about, as the camera records the scene? There is of course a strong awareness of being filmed, and of where the filming is occurring. The director, the DP, the camera operator, and various assistants are usually sitting or standing right behind the camera, which magnifies its presence. Lighting, whether real or artificial or both, does not come directly from the camera, but is obviously focused for its benefit. Yet the film actor is not thinking "camera-camera-camera," any more than the stage actor thinks "audience-audience-audience." The camera is like a searchlight on the scene; you are aware of the source, but are even more aware of what it illuminates. The *scene* has the focus of attention; the camera enables, even *forces*, that attention. You do not play *to* the camera—you are not even supposed to look at it—but you do perform *for* it.

To this degree, then, the camera is a surrogate audience. Both the audience for a stage play, and the camera for a film, focus the actor's attention. The difference is as noted: an audience member in the theatre has a strong awareness of the other audience members, while her counterpart in a movie theatre is rarely aware that the camera even existed. The camera may sometimes be a quasi-audience for the actor, but the ultimate, actual audience does not include the camera in its film-watching experience.

Consider, for example, a shot in a movie in which we see someone within a house exit via the front door. The next shot is from the street, showing him coming out. We do not feel as if we have somehow jumped from the house to the street, as we would if we were identifying with the camera. Instead, we are identifying with the person going out the door. It therefore seems natural that we should continue to see him; indeed, it would seem *un*natural if the interior shot continued, showing the empty room after he left it.

The camera, then, may be the actor's "friend" but it is not the audience's. Instead, it is the equivalent of the omniscient narrator in a third-person novel. If the novel's narrative says, "She went into the bedroom and changed her dress," we do not think, "Well, how do you know? Were you there? Were you spying through the keyhole?" Instead, we identify with the character changing her dress. The narration is transparent, neutral. We think about its content, not its technique.

Note that the camera disappears only when there is dramatization. For a documentary film, as for a talk show or newscast on television, we are fully aware that there is a camera. The performers look directly into the camera, talk about it, even make jokes about it, without creating any disruption. If there is any fancy camerawork, we are strongly aware of how it is done. My local television station

in Los Angeles, for example, regularly shows helicopter shots of freeway traffic, which always give me vertigo. When multiple shots depicted O. J. Simpson fleeing down the freeway, I began to worry that the helicopters might bump into one another. Filmmakers regularly use helicopter shots too, but I am hardly even aware that a helicopter is there. If a helicopter shot depicted someone fleeing from the police, I would concentrate entirely on the chase itself. The fictitious world of a dramatized movie captivates us, but makes us forget how it did so.

In sum, then, the camera has the same ultimate effect, for both actor and audience, of focusing attention on the actor's performance. The movie audience usually forgets about the existence of the camera, however, just as individual audience members forget about the existence of the rest of the audience. For the film actor, however, the camera remains in his mind as a reminder that he is giving a performance, that everything he does and says has a "shape," which conveys meaning to the audience and to the actor himself. The camera makes the actor not so much *self* conscious as *character* conscious. But, ironically, the camera does not validate the performance, does not give feedback to the actor on how good he was, which is ultimately why film acting remains so frustrating.

Notes

1. Donald Spoto, *Notorious: The Life of Ingrid Bergman* (London: Harper Collins, 1997) 126.

2. *Acting in Film* (New York: Applause, 1990) 3.

3. "Esther Rolle; Actress Was Mother on 'Good Times,'" Los Angeles *Times*, 19 November 1998: A26.

4. Jan Herman, *A Talent for Trouble: The Life of Hollywood's Most Acclaimed Director, William Wyler* (New York: Da Capo, 1997) 404.

BOOK REVIEWS