Film Acting and the Arts of Imitation

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Louise Brooks dit un jour que, pour devenir une star, un acteur doit pouvoir allier un comportement d'apparence naturel et une « excentricité » personnelle. Je me propose d'explorer certains des problèmes d'analyse que pose ce phénomène. Qu'est-ce qui constitue l'excentricité et comment, dans certains cas, le naturel vient l'équilibrer ? Que se passe-t)-il quand une star de cinéma est amenée, dans un film, à incarner les excentricités d'une autre star (Larry Parks en A Jolson, Clint Eastwood en John Huston, Cate Blanchett en Bob Dylan, Meryl Streep en Julia Child, etc) ? Comment faire la différence entre l'incarnation comme caricature et l'incarnation comme illusion dramatique ? Quelle différence y a-t-il, s'il y en a une, entre l'incarnation et l'influence stylistique ?

Louise Brooks once said that in order to become a star, an actor needs to combine a natural-looking behavior with personal "eccentricity." My presentation will explore some of the analytical problems raised by this phenomenon: What constitutes eccentricity and how is it balanced by naturalness in specific cases? What happens when a movie star acts in a film in which he or she impersonates the eccentricities of another star (Larry Parks as Al Jolson, Clint Eastwood as John Huston, Cate Blanchett as Bob Dylan, Meryl Streep as Julia Child, etc.)? How can we distinguish between impersonation as caricature and impersonation as dramatic illusion? What is the difference, if any, between impersonation and stylistic influence?

From the eighteenth until the early twentieth centuries the Aristotelian concept of mimesis governed most aesthetic theory, and stage acting was often described as an "imitative art." Denis Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1758), for example, argued that the best theatre actors played not from personal emotions or "sensibility," but from "imitation" (Cole and Chinoy 162). According to Diderot, actors who depended too much upon their emotions were prone to lose control, could not summon the same feelings repeatedly, and were likely to alternate between sublime and flat performances in the same play; properly imitative actors, on the other hand, were rational observers of both human nature and social conventions who developed imaginary models of dramatic characters and, by imitating those models, reproduced the same nuances of behavior and colors of emotion every evening.

For centuries actors on the stage were taught to imitate a vocabulary of gestures and poses, and variations on the theory of acting as imitation persisted into modern times, as we can see in the essays on aesthetics in the 1880 and 1911 editions of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, which try

to distinguish between the mimetic arts and the “symbolic” or abstract arts; in both editions, acting is described as an “imitative art” dependent upon and subordinate to the higher art of poetry. For the past seventy or eighty years, however, the dominant forms of actor training in the United States have minimized or even denied the importance of imitation and the related arts of mimicry, mime, and impersonation. “The actor does not need to imitate a human being,” Lee Strasberg famously declared. “The actor is himself a human being and can create out of himself” (Cole and Chinoy 623). More recently, the website of a San Francisco acting school specializing in the “Sandford Meisner Technique” (named for a legendary New York teacher of stage and screen performers) announces that its students will be taught to “live truthfully under imaginary circumstances” and to “express oneself while ‘playing’ imaginary circumstances” (www:themeisnertechniquestudio.com).

The change of emphasis from imitation to expression is due in part to motion pictures. Filmed performances are identical at every showing, making Diderot’s paradox appear irrelevant, and movie close ups of actors reveal the subtlest emotions, giving weight to the idiosyncrasies of personal expression. But the shift toward personally expressive acting precedes the movies and was not technologically determined. The first manifestations of the change appear in the second half of the nineteenth century, with Henrik Ibsen’s psychological dramas, William Archer’s call for actors to “live the part,” and Konstantin Stanislavsky’s new style of introspective naturalism. By the late 1930s, when variants of Stanislavsky’s ideas were fully absorbed into the US theatre and Hollywood had achieved hegemony over the world’s talking pictures, dramatic acting was nearly always evaluated in terms of naturalness, sincerity, and emotional truth of expression. A kind of artistic revolution had occurred, which, in some of its manifestations, was akin to the victory of romanticism over classicism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As M. H. Abrams explains in a famous study of that earlier revolution, the metaphor of art as a mirror reflecting the world was replaced by the metaphor of art as a lamp projecting individual emotions into the world. Where modern acting is concerned, “imitation” became associated with such words as “copy,” “substitute,” “fake,” and even “counterfeit.” (Notice also that in some contexts the related term “impersonation” signifies an illegal act.) The new forms of psychological realism, on the other hand, were associated with such words as “genuine,” “truthful,” “organic,” “authentic,” and “real.” Thus V. I. Pudovkin’s early book on film acting championed Stanislavsky’s idea that “an actor striving toward truth should be able to avoid the element of *portraying* his feelings to the audience” (334), and in the theatre the Actor’s Studio advocated the development of “private moments” and “organic naturalness.”

The irony of the situation is that classicism and romanticism are two sides of the same coin. As Raymond Williams has convincingly shown, the eighteenth-century doctrine of imitation was never intended as slavish adherence to a set of rules or to previous works of art; at its best, it was a set of precepts that were supposed to help artists achieve what Aristotle called “universals.” Similarly, romanticism aimed at showing what the poet William Blake termed “what Eternally Exists, Really and Unchangeably” (Williams 39). The imitative tradition and the cult of personal expression were therefore equally idealistic, equally committed to a representation of what they regarded as essential reality. Where the history of acting is concerned, the major difference between them is that the former claims to be Plato’s “second nature,” achieved by mimesis, and the latter claims to be original nature, achieved by playing “oneself.” Modern screen acting is truly different only when it follows a naturalistic or social-realist impulse, as in the neo-realists and in some productions of the U.S. Group Theater, or when, as in Brecht, it strives for alienation effects.

All these approaches to performance are capable of producing good acting, and in practice most modern actors are pragmatic rather than doctrinaire, willing to use whatever technique works or seems appropriate in particular circumstances. Notice, moreover, that while the technique of imitation and the technique of personal feeling are often opposed to one another by theorists, they are not mutually exclusive; it is quite possible for pantomime artists or actors who use conventional gestures to "live the part" and emotionally project "themselves" into their roles. A remarkable testimony to this phenomenon has been given to us by Martin LaSalle, the leading "model" in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* [1959]. LaSalle was not a professional actor at the time the picture was made, and he found himself serving as a kind of puppet, executing whatever movements and poses Bresson asked of him. His performance in the film is minimalist, seldom changing its expressive quality; at one point he sheds tears, but most of the time his off-screen narration, spoken quite calmly, serves to inform us of the intense emotions his character feels but does not obviously show on his face or in his voice. And yet LaSalle creates a memorably soulful effect, reminiscent in some ways of the young Montgomery Clift. In 1990, when documentary filmmaker Babette Mangolte tracked LaSalle down in Mexico, where he has worked for many years as a film and theatre actor, he described to her how the experience of *Pickpocket* had marked his entire life. He recalled that Bresson told his "models" to repeat actions over and over, never explaining why; at one point he shot forty takes of LaSalle doing nothing more than walking up a stairway. The technique nevertheless had emotional consequences for the actor. LaSalle believed that Bresson was trying to provoke "an inner tension that would be seen in the hands and eyes," as if he wanted to "weaken the ego of the `model,'" thereby inducing "doubt," "anxiety," and "anguish tinged with pleasure." While LaSalle's performance was achieved through a sort of pantomime or rote repetition of prescribed gestures and looks, it was by no means unfeeling. "I felt the tension of the pickpocket," LaSalle told Mangolte. "I think, even if we are only models, as [Bresson] says, we still take part in and internalize the activity. I felt as if I were living the situation, not externally but in a sensory way." The astonishing result was that after *Pickpocket* LaSalle moved to New York and studied for four years at The Actors Studio with Lee Strasberg, who became the second great influence on his career.

As important as emotion in acting may be, there is something disingenuous about the modern pedagogical tendency to devalue imitation, for we can find many instances in the history of cinema in which even the most naturalistic actors are required to imitate or impersonate, sometimes in obviously artificial fashion. We need only think of film comedy, which often involves mimicry of stereotypical behavior and a foregrounding of the mechanics of performance that drama tries to conceal. Alec Guinness, a distinguished stage actor whose work in dramatic films depended upon minimalism and British reserve, was one of the most natural looking performers in screen history, and yet he performed in a manifestly "imitative" way when he played comedy rather than drama. As George Smiley, the leading character in the British television adaptation of John Le Carre's *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy* (1989), Guinness is so quiet, so natural, so lacking in energetic movement and obvious emotion, that he makes the actors around him look like Dickensian caricatures; he reveals a repressed emotional intensity only when he makes slight adjustments of his eyeglasses and bowler hat. Contrast his performance in Alexander Mackendrick's dark comedy, *The Ladykillers* (1955): as the leader of a group of crooks who rent a room from a harmless little old lady, he wears comic buck teeth and sinister eye makeup, and his interactions with the landlady overflow with fake sincerity and oily sweetness. As Pudovkin might say, he *portrays* feelings, so that the audience, if not the naïve old lady, can see his absurdly unconvincing act.

The burlesque comic Ed Wynn once distinguished between joke-telling clowns and comic actors. The first type, Wynn explained, says and does funny things, and the second type says and does things funnily. The distinction does not quite hold because comic actors also say or do funny things; even so, light-comic genres often depend upon performers who can execute ordinary movements and expressions in amusing ways, as if "quoting" conventions. Ernst Lubitsch's Paramount musicals of the early 1930s, for example, require the actors to behave in a chic but visibly imitative style. In *The Love Parade* (1930), which employs a good deal of silent pantomime, Maurice Chevalier is cast as a Parisian playboy and military attaché to the unmarried and sexually yearning Queen of Sylvania, played by Jeanette MacDonald. When the two characters meet, their comically stiff formality soon dissolves into flirtation and then into a duet entitled "Anything to Please the Queen." Their every gesture, intonation and expression is so heightened and intensified that there is barely any difference between their talking and singing; and at one point during the song, Chevalier gives us a comic demonstration of pantomime acting: "You want me to be cold then I'll be cold," he sings, chin lifted, eyebrows raised, looking down his nose. "You want me to be bold then I'll be bold," he adds, smiling aggressively. "Or hot!" he shouts, standing at attention and promising "anything to please the Queen." As MacDonald leads him to her boudoir, he turns as if addressing a theatre audience, leers, and opens his eyes in delight.

In Lubitsch's slightly later musical, *One Hour with You* (1932), everyone poses, speaks, sings and exchanges glances in this imitative fashion, heightened by moments of rhymed dialogue and direct address to the audience. Chevalier and MacDonald play a happily married couple whose relationship is threatened when the wife's sexually promiscuous best friend, played by Genevieve Tobin, decides to seduce the husband. In the first scene involving the three characters, MacDonald stands close to Tobin, smiling in delight as they both look off-screen at Chevalier. "Look at him!" she says proudly, "Isn't he darling?" In close-up, Chevalier looks down at the floor and gives a modest, shy smile. "I think he's cute," Tobin says in a sly voice. Chevalier becomes serious and uncomfortable, frowning slightly. MacDonald whispers something in Tobin's ear while Tobin stares at Chevalier, interested and pleased with what she hears. "Oh!" she says in delighted surprise. A close-up shows Chevalier looking puzzled and concerned. MacDonald whispers again. "He can?" Tobin responds, looking Chevalier up and down in wonder. "Yes, he can!" says MacDonald proudly. In the next close-up, Chevalier is openmouthed. "Let's see him do it!" Tobin cries. MacDonald crosses to Chevalier and sweetly commands, "Darling, look like an owl!"

Lubitsch's non-musical comedy *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) might seem different because of Samson Raphaelson's witty dialogue, but it, too, involves imitation. In an early scene, Herbert Marshall stands in the moonlight on the balcony of a hotel in Venice, looking down at the Grand Canal, as an obsequious waiter hovers behind his shoulder. The waiter begins the conversation:

> Yes, Baron, what shall we start with, Baron?
> Hm? Oh, yes. That's not so easy. Beginnings are always difficult.
> Yes, Baron.
> If Casanova suddenly turned out to be Romeo, having supper with Juliet, who might become Cleopatra, how would you start?
> I would start with cocktails.
> Excellent. It must be the most marvelous supper. We may not eat it, but it must be marvelous.
> Yes, Baron
> And waiter?
> Yes, Baron.

You see that moon
Yes, Baron.
I want to see that moon in the champagne.
Yes, Baron. (Writes.) Moon in champagne.
I want to see, umm.
Yes, Baron.
And as for you, waiter. . .
Yes, Baron
I don't want to see you at all.
No, Baron.

Amusing as the words are, the charm of the scene has as much to do with Marshall's performance, which epitomizes the popular 1930s idea of ultra-cosmopolitan masculinity. His well-cut tuxedo, his slicked-back hair, his elegant pose with one hand holding a cigarette and the other in a jacket pocket – all this creates an air of "sophisticated-ness" befitting an advertisement in a luxury magazine; he also speaks amusingly, in a plummy English accent, almost singing his lines in a tone of worldly, romantic melancholy. He is too good to be true. We soon learn that he is a jewel thief, not a baron, perfectly suited to a film in which almost all the characters are pretending or wearing social masks.

An even more obvious form of imitation can be seen when actors play characters that try unsuccessfully to hide their true feelings from one another. A roughly similar kind of performance-within-performance occurs whenever a character briefly puts on a comic or ironic act for another character – something that often occurs in films that have theater or playacting as a theme. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, George Cukor's relatively realistic *Holiday* (1938) uses the theme of festive theatrical comedy in support of the already theatrical style of Katharine Hepburn, who plays the spirited daughter of a stuffy, high-bourgeois patriarch. Hepburn is truly happy only when she retreats to an attic "playroom" belonging to her dead mother, where she and the people close to her engage in puppet shows, musical entertainment, acrobatics, and comic imitations of her joyless father. When her sister's fiancé, played by Gary Grant, enters the playroom, she acts out a scene in which she impersonates his prospective father-in-law: "Well, young man?" she says in a masculine voice, looking sternly down her nose, crossing her arms, and demanding to know about Grant's background. The effect is roughly analogous to the moment in Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I* when Falstaff and Prince Hal comically act out an interview between the Prince and his father – an interview that is later played in earnest by the two characters being imitated.

The paradoxical relationship between acting in theatre and acting in life is also a theme in films *about* theatre, although in these cases it can become difficult to distinguish truth from pretense. In *All about Eve* (1950), the always flamboyant Bette Davis plays an aging theatrical star whose marriage and career are threatened by the off-stage machinations of an apparently naive and worshipful young understudy, played by Anne Baxter. Baxter's performance is cleverly balanced between innocence and gimlet-eyed guile, so that we can glimpse her deception even when it fools others. Discovered as a waif standing in the rain outside a theatre, she is invited into Davis's dressing room, where the star's director-husband and a famous playwright have gathered after the show. Humble and shy, she passionately praises Davis, whose performances she has attended many times. Soon she manages to flatter everyone in the room and convert them into a hushed audience, curious to hear the story of her life. Just then, Thelma Ritter, Davis's dresser and maid, enters and briefly disturbs the expectant mood. After a pause, Baxter proceeds, explaining that she is a poor farmer's daughter from Wisconsin who always loved theatre but took a job as a secretary in a brewery to help support her family; there she met

and married her husband Eddie, who also loved theatre, but World War II intervened and Eddie was killed in the South Pacific. Since then, she has been finding work wherever she can and attending Davis's performances at every opportunity. She tells all this with an absence of self-pity and an idealistic, worshipful attitude toward the stage, where "the unreal seemed more real to me." There are clues that this performance is contrived: she is a bit too pretty and nicely made up, her voice is a bit too cultivated and melodic, and her story contains a few too many sentimental clichés, which are underlined with poignant, non-diegetic music. Even so, she causes Bette Davis, whose face is covered with cold cream, to pluck a tissue from a box and wipe a tear from her eye. Thelma Ritter, a woman whom we feel has seen everything, is also impressed. "What a story!" Ritter sighs. "Everything but the bloodhounds snapping at her rear end."

If *All about Eve* concerns an actor who feigns emotion, *Being Julia* (2004), adapted from Somerset Maugham's *Theatre*, concerns an actor whose excess of personal feelings threatens to undermine her performances. Annette Bening plays a middle-aged British stage star of the 1930s, a larger than life character endowed with innate theatricality and acute emotional sensitivity. The realistic performance requires Bening to imitate certain conventional models of character; she must adopt a British accent, and her every gesture and expression, both on stage and off, must suggest the fragile histrionics of an aging diva. When we first see her, she makes a grand entrance into her husband-impresario's office, complaining with intense bravura that she is exhausted and in need of a rest. That evening she goes to an elegant restaurant and makes another grand entrance, smiling and nodding to acknowledge her admiring public; but when her homosexual dinner companion tells her that to avoid gossip they should not keep seeing one another, she breaks into copious tears. The ensuing plot concerns her affair with an American fan barely older than her adolescent son, who seduces her and then turns her into a miserable, sexually dependent slave. When the affair begins, she is lifted out of a mild depression and becomes giddy and girlish; but when her lover withdraws and treats her coldly, she becomes a haggard, weeping neurotic, alternately angry and groveling. What helps her conquer the roller-coaster of emotion is her memory of a long dead director and mentor, played by Michael Gambon, who magically appears in moments of crisis, criticizing her everyday performance and dispensing advice. Gambon is a projection of her own critical self-consciousness – an internal monitor or coach, created through her professional ability to mentally observe her performances as they happen, both on stage and in real life. In Denis Diderot's words, Julia has within herself, like all the best actors, "an unmoved and disinterested onlooker" (Cole and Chinoy 162). At her most anguished point, when she is weeping hysterically, Gambon appears and mocks her ability to "turn on the waterworks." He advises her to become a more imitative actor, exactly the sort of player Diderot might have admired: "You've got to learn to *seem* to do it – that's the art of acting! Hold the mirror up to nature, ducky. Otherwise you become a nervous wreck." In the film's concluding moments, this advice enables her to emerge victorious not only in private life but also on the stage, where her lover's new girlfriend has been cast alongside her.

The stage acting in *Being Julia*, shown in cinematic close ups, is manifestly artificial and full of tricks: we see heavy makeup on the actors' faces, we hear the actors' loud voices projected toward the theatre auditorium, and we glimpse Bening struggling with a misplaced prop during a tearful scene. In the off-stage sequences, however, the acting is realistic and the emotions are sometimes expressed in nakedly exposed style. In the scene in which Bening has her tearful breakdown, she wears no apparent makeup and her pale skin becomes read and blotchy as she weeps. We can never know (without asking her) how this scene was achieved – she may have been feigning emotion, she may have been playing "herself" in imaginary circumstances, and she

may have been doing both. No matter how she accomplished her task, her performance looks natural and spontaneous, as if she were *being* Julia rather than imitating her. At the same time, the audience recognizes her as Annette Bening, whose body and expressive attributes can be seen in other films. Bening's apparent authenticity of feeling, which earned her an Academy-Award nomination for Being Julia, is essential to the cinema of sentiment or high emotion and is valued in all of today's popular genres; but the doubling or tandem effect of recognizing Bening alongside the character has a longer history, essential to the development of the star system. It first emerged in eighteenth-century theatre, at the time of Diderot, when leading actors such as David Garrick not only imitated Hamlet but also brought individual style or personality to the role. Thus, as time went on, it became possible to speak of "David Garrick's Hamlet," "John Barrymore's Hamlet," "John Gielgud's Hamlet," "Laurence Olivier's Hamlet," and even "Mel Gibson's Hamlet."

In motion pictures this phenomenon was intensified, with the result that stars often gained ascendency over roles, repeatedly playing the same character types and bringing the same personal attributes and mannerisms to every appearance. Consider again Maurice Chevalier, who at Paramount in the 1930s was cast as a military officer, a medical doctor, and a tailor, but who always played essentially the same character. Chevalier had been a hugely popular cabaret singer and star of the Folies Bergères in Paris during the 1920s and Hollywood wanted him to display many of the performing traits associated with that success; at the same time, directors such as Lubitsch and Mamoulian modified those traits, making him less uninhibited and bawdy, more suitable to a general American audience. In his Paramount musicals of the pre-code era, he is always the boulevardier in a straw hat, the stereotypical representative of what American audiences at the time thought of as "gay Paree" – sophisticated, exuberant, grinning, amusingly adept at sexual innuendo, always ready to charm and seduce beautiful women. Hence in *The Love Parade* and *One Hour with You*, the films I have described above, he not only imitates certain conventional gestures and expressions for the sake of comedy but also reproduces the broad smile, the jaunty posture, the suggestive leer, the rolling eyes, and the distinctive French accent that were associated with "Maurice Chevalier." His public personality was in a sense unique, but it was nonetheless a carefully crafted "model" in Diderot's sense of the term – a model so idiosyncratic that Chevalier became a popular subject for generations of comic impersonators to imitate on stage and in film. (For a late and minor instance, see Yves Montand's brief, deliberately awkward impersonation of Chevalier in George Cukor's *Let's Make Love* [1960].)

Chevalier's performances were stylized and extroverted, indebted to the musical revues of Paris, and for that reason he could be viewed as what the early futurists and the Soviet avant-garde called an "eccentric" actor. In fact, as Jacques Aumont and others have shown, Sergei Eisenstein's doctrine of "eccentrism," which is most clearly evident in the grotesque caricatures of *Strike* (1924), was developed by analogy with circus and music-hall performers. Relatively few of the leading players in classic Hollywood had this extreme kind of eccentricity, although comics like the Marx Brothers and W. C. Fields or unusual personalities like Wallace Beery, Marie Dressler, and Mickey Rooney certainly qualify. Many character actors of the period were also eccentrics; indeed the very term "character actor," which in Shakespeare's day referred to a performer that played a single vivid type, was often used by the film industry to describe supporting players with almost cartoonish personalities. We need only think of the lively crowd of eccentrics in Preston Sturges's comedies – William Demarest, Eugene Pallette, Franklin Pangborn, Akim Tamiroff, Raymond Walburn, etc. Comedic females such as Eve Arden,

Marjorie Main and Thelma Ritter belong in the same category, as do many of the non-comic supporting players, such as Sydney Greenstreet, Elisha Cook, Jr. and Peter Lorre in John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Lorre, who had been an important actor for Brecht and who could also behave naturalistically when necessary, was an especially brilliant eccentric in Hollywood and there is hardly a film in which he appears that is not better because of his presence.

Leading players, on the other hand, tended to have symmetrical faces and usually behaved in a neutral, almost invisible fashion; their close-ups conveyed what Richard Dyer has called their "interiority," and the smallest movements of their bodies helped create a sense of their personalities. But the classic-era stars were no less carefully constructed performers than character actors; their identities were created not only by their roles but also by their physical characteristics and idiosyncrasies or peculiarities of expression. In an intriguing essay on Humphrey Bogart, Louise Brooks makes precisely this point. "All actors know that truly natural acting is rejected by the audience," Brooks writes. "Though people are better equipped to judge acting than any other art, the hypocrisy of `sincerity' prevents them from admitting that they, too, are always acting some role of their own invention. To be a successful actor, then, it is necessary to add eccentricities and mystery to naturalness, so that the audience can admire and puzzle over something different than itself" (64-65). Bogart was certainly a natural-looking performer who listened intently to other players and seemed to have a reflective, mysteriously experienced inner life; always visibly *thinking*, he conveyed what Andre Bazin describes as a mixture of "distrust and weariness, wisdom and skepticism" (100). His naturalness, however, was expressed through distinctive physical attributes and carefully crafted displays of his personal mannerisms. Brooks tells us that at the beginning of Bogart's career, racists made fun of what they called his "nigger mouth," which had a small scar on the upper lip; he turned the supposed flaw to his advantage, practicing what Brooks describes as "lip gymnastics" alongside a battery of grimaces and winces (60). He also employed a set of idiosyncratic gestures: to express thoughtfulness, for example, he often tugged at his earlobe, and to create an air of relaxed confidence or uneasy bravado he repeatedly hooked his thumb into his pants waist. At one level Bogart was simply reacting as he naturally would; but the gestures were practiced and perfected until they became part of an expressive rhetoric, a repertory of performance signs. At the height of his fame Bogart played many roles, among them a private eye, a gangster, a neurotic sea captain, a disturbingly violent Hollywood screenwriter, an old-rich New Yorker, and an aging Cockney sailor; but his eccentricity persisted through the variations of character. In a sense, he was always imitating or copying a model of Humphrey Bogart.

Like Chevalier, Bogart was a star that comic entertainers liked to impersonate. Others have included Marlon Brando, Bette Davis, James Cagney, Kirk Douglas, Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, Burt Lancaster, Marilyn Monroe, Edgar G. Robinson, James Stewart, and John Wayne. (The most popular subject of comic impersonation in the United States as I write this essay is probably Christopher Walken, an eccentric if ever there was one.) Usually the stars were subject to impersonation because of a peculiar voice or accent, an oddity of facial expression, or a distinctive walk. Some have had all three. John Wayne had a deep voice with a drawling California accent, a habit of raising his eyebrows and wrinkling his forehead to express surprise or consternation, and an oddly rolling, almost mincing gait. For her part, Marilyn Monroe had a breathy voice, a parted mouth with a quivering upper lip (a quiver that, as Richard Dyer has observed, was designed not only to express yielding sexuality but also to hide an upper gum line), and an undulating, provocative walk that emphasized her hips and breasts. Some of

the legendary stars tended to be impersonated on the basis of a single attribute or a single role – Brando's voice in *On the Waterfront*, Gable's in *Gone with the Wind*, and Robinson's in *Little Caesar*. Others, especially the stoic males like Dana Andrews or the flawless females like Ava Gardner, were difficult to mimic except perhaps in caricatured drawings. But even the less eccentric actors had performing quirks or tricks, such as Andrews' tendency to cock his elbow out to his side when he drinks from a glass. There are so many famous names one could mention in this context that eccentricity would seem the norm rather than the exception. Sometimes the eccentricity is sui generis, and sometimes it has an influence on the culture. Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe's mannerisms have been imitated by other actors in more or less subtle ways; James Cagney spawned a generation of teenaged performers, among them the Dead End Kids, who copied the early Cagney's ghetto-style toughness and swagger.

In the history of cinema there have been many occasions when famous actors have not simply imitated but impersonated other famous actors. One of the best known examples is Tony Curtis's impersonation of Cary Grant in *Some Like it Hot* (1959), which is based almost entirely on Grant's distinctive, Cockney-inflected yet vaguely upper-class British accent. (Curtis's equally amusing impersonation of a woman in that same film is based partly on Eve Arden.) A more recent instance is Cate Blanchett's remarkable impersonation of Bob Dylan in Todd Haynes's *I'm Not There* (2007), a film in which Dylan is also played by Christian Bale, Marcus Carl Franklin, Richard Gere, and Heath Ledger. Blanchett is the only actor in the group who tries to look and behave like Dylan, and her performance is a tour de force, achieving uncanny likeness to the androgynous pop star in the most drugged phase of his career. But impersonation in fiction film, especially when performed by a star, has a paradoxical effect; the more perfect it is, the more conscious we are of the performer who accomplishes it. Successful impersonation in real life is a form of identity theft, but in theatre or film our pleasure as an audience derives from our awareness that it is Curtis pretending to be Grant or Blanchett pretending to be Dylan, never a complete illusion.

The example of Blanchett serves to remind us that the film genre most likely to involve overt imitation or impersonation of one actor by another is the biopic, or more specifically the biographical film that tells the life story of a celebrity in the modern media. Film biographies of remote historical figures or real-life personalities from outside the media seldom if ever require true impersonation; we have no recordings or films of Napoleon or Lincoln, and the many actors who have played them on the screen needed only conform in general ways to certain painted portraits or still photographs (amazingly, when Stanley Kubrick planned his never-filmed epic about Napoleon, he wanted to cast Jack Nicolson in the leading role). The audience also seems inclined to suspend disbelief in representations of historical characters, as long as the performance is consistent and plausible: Willem Dafoe has played Jesus Christ, Max Shreck, and T. S. Eliot without radically changing his outward appearance; Sean Penn is utterly convincing as gay activist Harvey Milk in *Milk* (2008), but he does not closely resemble Milk in the physical sense. When a conventionally realistic biopic concerns a popular star of film or television, however, the situation is more complex. The actor often needs to give a reasonably accurate and convincing impersonation of a known model and to look like the model while also serving the larger ends of the story. No matter how accurate the impersonation might be, the audience will inevitably be aware that an actor is imitating a famous personage; but if it becomes too much a display of virtuoso imitation (as it does for comic purposes when Curtis impersonates Grant and for intentionally deconstructive purposes when Blanchett impersonates Dylan), it can create an unwanted alienation effect.

Larry Parks' portrayal of Al Jolson in a quintessential Hollywood biopic, *The Jolson Story* (1946), deals with these problems by almost avoiding impersonation during the dramatic episodes of the film. Parks behaves with an ebullience appropriate to an old-time showman, occasionally speaking with a brash New York accent, but he makes little attempt to mimic the famous entertainer's distinctive looks or vocal tone; far more handsome than the real Jolson, who was alive and a star on the radio when the film was made, he simply adds his attractiveness, youthful vigor and charm to the generally flattering, glamorizing aims of the project. When he breaks into song, however, he creates a different effect. We hear the actual Jolson's voice on the soundtrack – a voice that gives the film an aura of authenticity and convinces us of Jolson's talent – but Parks very convincingly recreates the singer's trade-mark mannerisms, most of which were derived from years of performing in provincial vaudeville and blackface minstrel shows. All the signature Jolson moves are on display: the rhythmic rocking from side to side, the strut across the stage, the broad grin, the widely rolling eyes, the clasped hands, the dropping to the floor on one knee with arms open wide, and so forth. These gestures and expressions had become so much associated with Jolson that he was relatively easy to impersonate; but they were also dated, as were the Jolson songs like "Mammy," so that he was in danger of becoming a cliché or quaint caricature. (At one innocently reflexive moment, the film seems to acknowledge this possibility: Evelyn Keyes, who plays Jolson's wife, does an enthusiastic but joking impersonation of Jolson singing "California, Here I Come." Only a few moments before, we've seen Larry Parks as Jolson singing that same number.) Parks' charisma and energy nevertheless manage to overcome the dangers of camp nostalgia, enlivening the film and even enhancing Jolson's image as a singer. Parks never jokes with the all-too predictable Jolson persona and in the end becomes exactly what Hollywood wants him to be: an idealized version of Jolson as played by the star Larry Parks.

Beyond the Sea (2004), a somewhat modernist, Fellini-esque biopic about the short life of singer/actor Bobby Darrin, makes an interesting contrast with *The Jolson Story*. Kevin Spacey, who not only stars in the film but also produced, directed, and co-authored the screenplay, is an unusually gifted mimic and a sincere admirer of Darrin. He sings all the musical numbers himself, and is such a skillful impersonator that when the film was released he went on tour in the United States performing a live recreation of Darrin's nightclub act. In my own view, however (and in the interest of transparency I should say that I, too, am an admirer of Darrin), Spacey's impersonation, though quite accurate, is disappointing. Ironically, the closer he comes to reproducing Darrin's voice and mannerisms, the more he reveals a disparity between himself and the man he is imitating. A chameleon performer, Bobby Darrin was the equal of Sinatra as a singer of ballads and swing arrangements and just as good at rock and roll, country, and social protest songs. His nightclub and television appearances were filled with sexy energy and exciting dance moves, and his few films demonstrated fine acting abilities in both light comedy and Method-style psychological realism. Spacey is a less dynamic and charismatic personality, and to make matters worse he is slightly too old. The whole purpose of the film is to celebrate Darren's talent, which was doomed from the start because of a childhood illness; unfortunately, and no doubt unintentionally, *Beyond the Sea* feels more like a vanity project in celebration of Spacey's talent for mimicry.

Biopics in general are crucially dependent upon a dialectical interaction between mimicry and realistic acting, an interaction that can become threatened when a major star undertakes an impersonation. In *White Hunter Black Heart* (1990), one of Clint Eastwood's most under-rated films, Eastwood plays a character based on John Huston and in the process he accurately imitates

Huston's slow, courtly manner of speaking. Good as the imitation is, it has a slightly disconcerting or comic effect, if only because it is performed by an iconic star in the classic mold; any basic change in such an actor's voice and persona seems bizarre, almost as if he had donned a strange wig or a false nose. Probably for this reason, some of the most effective impersonations in recent films have been accomplished by actors who are not stars in the classic sense. Meryl Streep, for example, has performed a variety of characters and accents, so that when she impersonates the celebrity chef Julia Child in *Julie and Julia* (2009) there is no great dissonance between the star persona and the role.

Like Streep, Phillip Seymour Hoffman is famous as an actor rather than as a star – or perhaps it is better to say that Hoffman's particular kind of stardom is based on his work as an actor, not on his sex appeal or public personality. One of the high points of his career is his impersonation of author Truman Capote in *Capote* (2005), which won several awards and was widely praised by people who had known Capote intimately. Whatever the shortcomings of the film, Hoffman's work is exemplary. If we look closely we can easily see the actor behind the mask of Capote, but this actor does not have a well-known persona that generates conflict with the mask. The impersonation, moreover, is never slavish, so nuanced and emotionally convincing that the display of imitative skill never distracts viewers from the characterization. Hoffman's achievement is all the more impressive because Capote was an ostentatiously eccentric figure, the kind of personality that might seem comically grotesque. An effective self-publicist who relished celebrity and society gossip, he was far better known than most writers in America; people who never read his books saw him often on television, especially as a guest on Johnny Carson's popular *Tonight Show*, but it was difficult to say whether the mass audience viewed him more as a witty TV conversationalist or as a freak. Short and chubby, with a round face resembling a dissipated child, he spoke in a high-pitched, nasal, quite effeminate voice that was marked by a whining Southern drawl, and he gestured with broad, limp-wristed movements. In the period when he became famous, few if any media personalities were so obviously and theatrically gay.

Very soon after *Capote* was released, the actor Toby Jones played Capote in *Infamous* (2006), which, like the Hoffman film, deals with the events surrounding the writing of Capote's *In Cold Blood*, a so-called "non-fiction novel" about the murder of a Kansas farm family and the capture and execution of the two killers. Jones's performance is much less interesting than Hoffman's, even though he has the advantage of a greater natural resemblance to the diminutive Capote. Hoffman's neck and chin are relatively strong and his physique sturdy; he is also a bit too tall, although the film compensates for this problem by the way it frames and photographs him in relation to the other actors. At the technical level of impersonation, he adopts Capote's hair style and effeminate gestures, together with appropriate costumes such as the luxurious scarf and floor-length top coat we see him wearing in the Kansas scenes. He stands as Capote did, with back slightly arched and belly thrust forward, and is especially good at duplicating the Capote voice and accent, which he masters to such a degree that he uses it effectively even in the softly spoken, intimate moments. (His co-star, Catherine Keener, who plays Harper Lee, the famous author of *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, has far less need to impersonate because Lee was notoriously shy and reclusive, lacking a celebrity image.) Beyond mimicry, Hoffman's portrayal is noteworthy because of its naturalness and psychological nuance, which are worthy of the best Stanislavskian acting. Even his impersonation of Capote is wedded to a subtle psychological idea about the character. Largely through silent reaction shots, he enables us to see Capote's mingled voyeuristic curiosity and fear over the murders; his growing attraction to one of the killers; and

his cunning manipulation of the Kansas community, the two condemned men, and the publishers of his book. As Robert Sklar has pointed out, the contradictions and complexities of the character are shaped and shaded by Hoffman's appropriation of typical Capote mannerisms: "In an early scene, Hoffman/Capote points his chin in the air, a movement signaling at once vanity and vulnerability. The actor conveys Capote's conviction that his inner demons can be controlled by regarding the `self' as a constant performance. It's a life strategy that the film *Capote* puts to the test, and finds ruinously wanting" (57).

As one final example of effective impersonation, consider the performance of the largely unknown Christian McKay in Richard Linklater's *Me and Orson Welles* (2009), a film that imagines a single week in New York in 1937, when, through a combination of boyish self-confidence and amazing good luck, a teen-aged acting hopeful, played by Zac Efron, finds himself swept up into the whirlwind staging of Orson Welles's modern-dress *Julius Caesar*. In several ways this film is disappointing. The re-enactment of events surrounding the staging of the play gives virtually no sense of the politics of the Mercury Theater and too little evidence of why *Julius Caesar* made such a powerful impression on those who saw it; and when we witness snippets of the show on opening night they lack the disturbing patterns of light and darkness and aura of violence that stunned the original audience. Instead, everything is subordinated to a comic portrayal of behind-the-scenes sexual shenanigans and to demonstrations of Welles's will to power. Like most fictional movies about Welles, *Me and Orson Welles* seems to take more relish in depicting his character flaws (at least one of which, womanizing, was no doubt true) than in his artistic accomplishments. In this case we are shown a quarrel between technician Samuel Leve, who wants credit on the show's playbill, and Welles, who thunderously declares that *Julius Caesar* is "my vision."[1]

The film nevertheless has redeeming qualities. It gives a fine sense of how a romantic, idealistic theatre company on the verge of great things can become an ambitious young man's family of choice, albeit a family with as many rivalries and disillusionments as any other. As its title indicates, it depicts not just Welles but nearly everyone in the Mercury Theater as amusingly self-preoccupied and narcissistic; even Zac Efron, the star of Walt Disney's *High School Musical* franchise and the heart-throb of millions of teen-aged girls, cleverly reveals the calculation lurking behind innocence. Chief among the virtues of the film, however, is McKay, whose impersonation of Welles is a delight. Welles has been played by many actors, including Paul Shenar, Eric Purcell, Jean Guerin, Vincent D'Onofrio (aided by the voice of Maurice LaMarche), Liev Schreiber, and Angus MacFadyen – but none have come this close to his looks, voice, and slightest movements.

The actors around McKay do little to imitate the real-life figures they represent: James Tupper looks a bit like Joseph Cotton, but Eddie Marsan, Leo Bill, and Ben Chaplin have no resemblance at all to John Houseman, Norman Lloyd, and George Coulouris. Almost the entire responsibility of creating a persuasive historical representation falls on one actor, who proves worthy of the task. Before appearing in the film McKay had performed successfully in a one-man stage show about Welles, and apparently he came to know his model intimately – the vaguely mid-Atlantic accent, the twinkle in the eye, the forbidding glance, the heavy yet somehow buoyant walk. He is slightly too old (Welles was twenty-two at the time of *Caesar*) and he never displays Welles' wonderfully infectious laugh; but he merges with the character more

[1] Where this quarrel is concerned, I recommend that readers consult John Houseman's *Run-Through: A Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pages 296-98, where we are told that Leve's job, under the direction of Jean Rosenthal, was simply to convert Welles' design sketches into blueprints.

completely than a star could have done and is just as convincing when he tries to seduce a young woman as when he proclaims ideas about theatre. To hear him read aloud a passage from Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* is to feel as if one were in the presence of Welles himself. Even so, the actor McKay is always present alongside the impersonation, taking obvious pleasure in the magic trick he performs, enabling us to see that Welles was not simply a flamboyant personality but an actor and director of seriousness and importance who could bring audiences to their feet. Imitation may not be the most valued aspect of what actors do in cinema, but as I have been trying to show throughout this essay, it is central to the rhetoric of characterization and the formation of personality on the screen. When we encounter an overt, creative impersonation such as the one performed by McKay, we can begin to appreciate imitation in all its performing manifestations as what it has always been: a form of art.

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