

Transformative meeting: the creative moment in screen performance

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Abstract

In this paper the creative moment in screen performance will be examined. An encounter theory of modern cinema will be introduced and the connectedness of the process of screen performance in filmmaking and its reception explored. The encounter perspective, reflecting an interpretation of creativity based on a traditional romantic view of art, will be exemplified through a thorough case study analysis and critical review of the scholarly literature as it pertains to director-actor collaborations. Influenced by Leo Tolstoy's treatise "*What is Art?*" in which Tolstoy argued that a real work of art destroys the separation between the spectator and the artist, this paper will analyse transformative meeting in screen performance. Konstantin Stanislavski's acting system—that advanced naturalistic techniques to encourage actors to create believable performances, exerting such a profound influence upon method acting on screen—will be deliberated upon, as will the similarities of an aesthetic of impermanence in traditional Japanese Noh, which demands a total identification of the actor with their role. The radical and innovative theatre director Jerzy Grotowski, who considered encounter to be the core of acting—a self-revelation requiring an emergence from oneself, opening up infinite interpretive possibilities for the viewer—will also be appraised.

The working practices of three remarkable actor director relationships in film history, notably the creative collaboration between director Akira Kurosawa and actor Toshiro Mifune; that of Carl Theodor Dreyer and Renee Maria Falconetti and Terrence Malick and Martin Sheen, will be advanced in support of this view. This paper concludes that these partnerships attest to an interdependent relationship in screen production in which an actor has the capacity to trust in the director and surrender completely and without self-monitoring, to the creative moment.

An encounter theory of modern cinema

Encounter theory is a dialogical theory of modern cinema that is firmly founded upon careful examination and observation of the link between creative process and viewer perception, a relation of address and response to address evading reduction through signification (Fackenheim 1996). A movement hinged on the premise that the aesthetic may be conceived through a process of encounter, an encounter defined as a meeting which consumes and transforms a paradoxical “in between” state of “presence” and “disappearance” (Friedman 1976, 67). Encounter theory is a communion between the filmmakers the spectator and the film, a phenomenology of aesthetic experience, in which the film as an object of art springs from the fact that the filmmakers are essentially related to something other than themselves (Buber 1947, 165).

Encounter theory is not a symbol or an expressive form, but derived from the sensory realm, from the fullness of the presence of being, one from which a relation arises, a relation with the power to address the viewer as an independent other, so much so that the work confronts a response, impinging upon the viewer’s entire being. In the case that human interaction is involved, such as on set between a director and actor, encounter theory is a meeting of absolute immersion, of moving into and putting oneself in the place of another to enter and apprehend with a deeper understanding of what is singular and inexpressible in order to experience the immediacy and full spectrum of an experience or thing without modification and to transform and be transformed in the process (Buber 1958).

This paper will illustrate encounter in art practice through an exploration of communion in performance. Director Konstantin Stanislavski’s acting system, emphasising transference as the foundation for dialogue, in which the separation between the artist and the viewer may be shattered, will be examined. The successful inter-dependent creative collaboration between director Akira Kurosawa and actor Toshiro Mifune will also be explored.

This relationship, in which Mifune trusted Kurosawa to oversee his performance thus releasing Mifune from self-monitoring and allowing him to surrender entirely to the moment as exemplified in the film *Throne of Blood* (1957) is supportive of encounter theory. Similarly Japanese Noh performance, which requires the total identification of the actor with the role, will also illustrate this point, as will Jerzy Grotowski’s “poor theatre” methods, which encourage confrontation and involve an actor’s total being. Further illustration will be provided by the uninhibited performance of Renee Maria Falconetti in “*La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*” (1928) an encounter in which the changing beauty of the human face has been enshrined.

Communion in performance: the actor’s director

Konstantin Stanislavski, the Russian stage director, was a pioneer of naturalistic dramatic training. A co-founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski was the innovator of the most influential acting “system” of the twentieth century, the system on which almost all other approaches to the craft of acting have been based, including the “the method” in the United States of America. (Benedetti 1998). In particular his revolutionary work on character development, with its stress on improvisation and the intimacy of authentic inner feeling designed to liberate the actor to the truth of the moment, will be examined in this paper. Stanislavski’s approach exerts a profound effect upon screen performance and arguably favours cinema, due to the ability to capture expression in close-up, with the aid and magnification of the camera lens.

Such celebrated acting schools as the Group Theatre (with ensemble members Lee Strasberg, Elia Kazan, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner) have dramatically shaped acting in both the Hollywood system and independent cinema. The Actors Studio, responsible for training some of the most talented and successful actors in the history of cinema, such as Marlin Brando, Jack Nicholson and Robert De Niro, to name but three, is a legacy of the innovations and techniques derived from Konstantin Stanislavski's contribution to the art form. Devoted and rigorous Stanislavski's practices of training and rehearsal were developed and refined through a process of observation, experimentation and trial and error, a life's work that spanned decades and culminated in a leading resource in the fields of acting and direction (Benedetti 2005).

Stanislavski recognised the boundaries of acting as an art form. He cautioned against mechanical acting and exploitative and manipulative approaches to acting. He was of the view that it was an actor's responsibility to "live" their role not to merely represent a role but rather to tap into genuine feelings and to directly co-operate with nature to be believed. As part of an actor's work on himself, Stanislavski dedicated an entire chapter in his famous work *An Actor Prepares* (1936) to the importance of communion with the nature of creativity emphasising transmission, the presence of a connection between the actor and the spectator, a direct consequence of the complete fusion of the actor with his role. Stanislavski argued that transformation may be possible when an actor is completely absorbed, that in surrendering him/herself to the part, the effect on the audience is contagious. "If actors really mean to hold the attention of a large audience they must make every effort to maintain an uninterrupted exchange of feelings, thoughts and actions among themselves. The exceptional importance of this process makes me urge you to devote special attention to it" (Stanislavsky 1936, 195).

Stanislavski pointed out that it is possible to be present but absent to the moment, to be in one place physically but with one's thoughts elsewhere - in the past perhaps or the future, - to look and simply not to see, to share proximity without mutual exchange, to be with someone but to feel a disconnect. "What torture to play opposite an actor who looks at you and yet sees someone else. Such actors are separated from the very persons with whom they should be in closest relationship" (Stanislavsky 1936, 203).

Thus for communion to prevail each and every time actors encounter one another in performance the meeting must be fresh, spontaneous, and new. Any form of premeditated approach will impose behaviour that is divorced from the reality of the moment, not only preventing a relation between the actors but also compromising the authenticity of the emotional life that is being expressed. If the actors cease to be real and begin the work from a cerebral space they risk moving into representation and are no longer able to sustain a creative dialogue (Weston 1996, 8).

Stanislavski discouraged automated rote learning of past behaviours even with the repetition of the same lines and actions. He insisted upon a constant engagement between the actors, conscious that the work would otherwise lack connection and appear lifeless to the viewer. He was adamant that "without absorbing from others or giving of yourself to others there can be no intercourse on the stage. To give to or to receive from an object something, even briefly, constitutes a moment of spiritual intercourse." (Stanislavsky 2006, 195).

According to Stanislavski, an art work will contain some trace of the life of the artist who created it through the process of communion. For this reason he fervently encouraged a mutual and constant exchange dependent on a continuous flux of give and take whereby the actor participates in the sensation being imparted. A state of flow gifted freely and absorbed, enveloping the other actor. The establishment of an invisible current between subjects creates a bond under the surface of the dialogue and action “like a piece of iron being drawn by a magnet.” (Stanislavsky 1936, 214). A well-known example of the successfulness of this type of method acting is the “I could have been a contender” exchange between Marlin Brando and Rod Steiger in “*On the Waterfront*” (1954) with both actors playing off each other’s performance in this scene.

Stanislavski termed this paradoxical encounter “grasp” an ability to seize with ease to simultaneously give out and take in, an intensity of relaxed concentrated attention heightening an actor’s inner activity without any outward show of visible muscular tension. Transformation in art is possible through such a mutual communion. When actors devote all their interest and focus to remaining in contact with one another the public will also become infected and responsive. “Attention is like a reflector; it throws its rays on some chosen object and arouses in it the interest of our thoughts feelings and desires” (Stanislavsky 1936, 245).

Stanislavski’s praxis of acting was directly influenced by Leo Tolstoy’s treatise “*What is Art?*” (Benedetti 1999, 46) in which Tolstoy considers union the affect of art. Tolstoy explained art as an alchemical activity of relatedness a connection beginning with the wish of an artist to evoke certain experiences and sensations which they experienced themselves and a process of then transmitting these sensations into an assimilated form, an external object communicated and infused with the same feeling the artist had. If and only if the spectator experiences such an encounter, in which there is a dissolution of individuality that unites the spectator and the artist and those who have also encountered the art work, then the object evoking such an infectious condition would qualify as a work of art. Tolstoy considered that the magnitude of infectiousness acted as a barometer of the excellence of the art work (Tolstoy 1897, 140).

Tolstoy distinguished a work of art from other works, however spectacular and interesting, on this basis. It is not a work of art if it does not evoke that feeling of communion which is distinct from all other feelings. Releasing our being from its own confinement, and uniting it with other persons is the primary characteristic of the great magnetic force of art.

A real work of art destroys, in the consciousness of the receiver, the separation between himself and the artist - not that alone, but also between himself and all whose minds receive this work of art (Tolstoy 1897, 140).

One of the most famous director-actor relationships in the history of cinema would have to be the partnership of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune. In Akira Kurosawa’s oeuvre, Mifune performed in a total of sixteen films, appearing in every Kurosawa production in the period between 1948 and 1965, bar one, “*Ikiru*” (1952). Mifune’s presence and synergy with Kurosawa contributed significantly to shaping what may be considered Kurosawa’s finest and most popular works, which are not limited to the well-known “*Rashomon*” (1950) “*Seven Samurai*” (1954) “*Throne of Blood*” (1957) and “*Yojimbo*” (1961). One of the advantages of having worked alongside Kurosawa for so long, as Donald Rickie suggests, is the development of a very rare instance of symbiosis—a cohesiveness through which Kurosawa was able to reflect facets of himself and inhabit Mifune—a melding in which one cannot be thought of other than in relation to the other (Richie 1970, 115).

Kurosawa was enamoured of Mifune's astounding talent. By his own admission he was rarely impressed by actors, but in Mifune he recognised a rarity, inspired by his acute sensibility, fluid sense of timing, boldness and speed of expression which he conveyed directly and powerfully to screen (Kurosawa 1982, 161). Kurosawa's openness and receptivity to Mifune and Mifune's complete trust in Kurosawa facilitated a remarkable synthesis, of thesis and an antithesis between director and actor. From the very onset in Mifune's debut feature film "*Drunken Angel*" (1948), Kurosawa guided Mifune's performance, forging a remarkable relationship that instilled confidence and co-operation.

In the art of acting the audience's belief in an actor's performance hinges on the actor's willingness and capacity to surrender completely to the moment. For an unselfconscious performance actors cannot afford to self-evaluate their performance because the act of self-monitoring shows. Should actors watch themselves, the encounter between the viewed and the viewer will be broken and the magic lost. The relationship between director and actor is an interdependent and paradoxical one. To protect the actor, the actor must allow themselves to depend upon the director. Mifune unequivocally trusted Kurosawa to oversee his performance, and the paradox of this dependence liberated him (Weston 1996, 8).

In the last scene "*Throne of Blood*" (1957) Kurosawa insisted on authenticity—the use of real arrows to be shot by professional archers—which was extremely dangerous. Completely present and in the moment Mifune encountered genuine fear and responded as himself. Exposed and vulnerable Toshiro Mifune, playing a lord that was about to be murdered was so frightened that, as he has stated in print, he wasn't acting during the shooting of this scene, that what was captured on celluloid was the genuine terror in his eyes (Mellen 2008, 77). Such was the collaboration, artistic commitment and level of trust between the two men.

Unlike Stanislavski's naturalistic acting approach, Japanese Noh is a highly stylised form of performance. Despite the differences between these two influential, but culturally distinct, acting systems, they share a similar point of reference: that of a complete identification of the actor with their role. In contrast to the method acting approach, in which the actor strives to immerse themselves in the sensation of the role until they are totally and spontaneously in character, the highly complex system of Noh performance regulates every detail of external expression with concentrated purpose until the actor is able to do the right thing in the right place at the right time. It is essentially a devotional practice that requires the total accord of the internal and the external until the performer is so in tune with their part that they perform it subliminally permitting the possession of the self. In the process of becoming one with their character, mastery of the technique is transformed into art (Bethe and Brazell 2016).

Having Buddhist roots, the meaning of, Noh refers to the bond between the performer and the spectator. Within the circle of actors an undercurrent of unspoken communication is exchanged, when a performance is pulsating with life, a magnetic exchange of timing that reinforces, feeds and draws power from the performance of others. In traditional times an ensemble would perform a particular play together only once. In this way the tempo of a given performance is not set by any single performer but established by the interaction of all the performers. It establishes an environment in which the art is created openly and immediately embraces the audience directly, with the audience participating in the reality of its creation. Hence Noh exemplifies the traditional Japanese aesthetic of transience (Marvin 2010).

In “*Throne of Blood*”, an adaptation of “*Macbeth*”, Kurosawa radically fuses the art of Noh within the Shakespearian plot. In the tradition of the Noh performance style, Lady Asaji (played by the famous stage actress Isuzu Yamada) is a mixture of both stillness and disturbance, but the apparent stasis is deceiving, because it contains a dynamic “inner tension”. The most compelling moments of Noh are those in which a performer appears to be sitting quietly, doing nothing. During Lady Asaji’s discussion and engagement with her husband she is very still and poised, her face immobile and as unblinking as a Noh mask. On the rare occasions that she moves, even slightly, as with a turn of the head or a raising of an eyebrow, her body is very expressive and her true feelings are revealed to the spectator.

Under the Noh method, Lady Asaji’s frustration and seething anger is rendered all the more profound and chilling because of the understated manner in which it is communicated. Her face is a mask, and her words, like poison oozing from her mouth, add to the perception, in the mind of the viewer, of her concealed viciousness, accentuated in the juxtaposition of the sound of her soft, smooth, silk kimono and her vehemently restrained movements which further intensifies the penetrating coldness of her presence (Mellen 2008, 65).

In a Noh performance, both the style and the story are one. Kurosawa made the aesthetic choice of synthesising this characteristic with the plot of *Macbeth* so that the form and content would be balanced. The art of Noh mask appears to be static and motionless but it actually involves impassioned movement, resembling that of an acrobat. The movement is so violent that one is left wondering how the performer is able to manage to move so pugnaciously. The player capable of such an action performs it quietly hiding the movements therefore, quietness and vehemence co-exist. The power of Noh, compared to other forms of performance, is its speed its capacity to produce a distilled sense of intensity for the spectator in a short space of time (Kurosawa 1982, 67).

Jerzy Grotowski, a leading revolutionary figure of the theatrical avant garde, considered encounter the core of performance. His concept of poor theatre was fundamentally centred on the relationship between the audience and the actor, and on refining the actor’s natural gifts of body and voice, stripped of unnecessary adornments such as make-up, costume, props, and lighting. Creating a performance space with a purpose beyond entertainment in which a direct and unencumbered exchange between the actor and the audience could take place.

Grotowski conceived of excellence in acting as a sincere, precise and total confrontation that involved the actor’s entire being. “The man who makes an act of self-revelation is, so to speak, one who establishes contact with himself” (Grotowski 1968, 57). He also regarded performance as a process of encounter between creative people and artistic experience as a function of human reactions and impulses resulting from such contact between people. For example, encounter may be realised in the artistic process when a director who is confronted by the self-revelation of an actor, experiences the revelation for him or herself, or in a situation where both director and actor are confronted by a significant work of art, such as in the text of Shakespeare’s “*Hamlet*”.

Such a text is not a fixed mark that can be dissected and easily explained, but a mystery to be met with and understood. Countless books have been dedicated to the character of Hamlet, but there can be no objective Hamlet. Similarly, it is as impossible to objectify a genuine meeting between a director and an actor at work, just as it is to objectify such a text, because the possibilities of interpretation are open-ended and infinitely faceted. Art is not a science. Grotowski employs the analogy of a scalpel used in an operation to explain the nature of transcending one’s solitude. “It is the experience which we take upon ourselves when we open ourselves to others, when we confront ourselves with them in order to understand ourselves” (Grotowski 1968, 57).

Played with raw magnetic beauty Renee Maria Falconetti's mesmerising presence in "*La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*" (1928) has been widely hailed as one of the great screen performances of all time. In a completely uninhibited performance she is guided and inspired by the rigour of director Carl Theodor Dreyer's whole-hearted faith in and commitment to, the changeful beauty of human nature and in his trust in the refinement of his chosen actor, as demonstrated by his decision to cast a largely untried screen performer in the lead role.

Nothing in the world can be compared to the human face. It is a land one can never tire of exploring. There is no greater experience in a studio than to witness the expression of a sensitive face under the mysterious power of inspiration. To see it animated from inside, and turning into poetry" (Dreyer 1956, 3).

A partnership that discarded half measures, it is said that Falconetti's performance was the result of an exhausting ordeal in which countless takes of each scene were shot in order to obtain in the edit her most moving facial expressions. It is a performance for which Dreyer is reputed to have deprived Falconetti of necessary sustenance and sleep, demanding that she spend hours kneeling on a cold stone floor only to be instructed to remove all expression from her face so that the audience would be able to participate in the nuances of her inner physical pain (Carr 2002). Such an emotionally open performance—the emergence from oneself in a total act—is an invitation to the spectator. This act, both "paradoxical" and "borderline" epitomised for Jerzy Grotowski an actor's calling, a calling of passive courage, the courage to be exposed, vulnerable and defenceless (Dreyer 1956, 3).

"*La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*" is a visceral human document based on the historical transcript of Jeanne d'Arc's trial and condemnation, following which she was burnt alive at the stake on charges of heresy in 1431. In one famous exchange during her brutal interrogation Jeanne is asked if she is in God's grace. Quiet and slow in her response to this enquiry she simply answers: "If I am not may God put me there; and if I am may God so keep me." Had she answered yes, she would have been deemed guilty of heresy. Had she answered no, she would have been admitting her own guilt. This neither/nor response is indicative of Jeanne's humility, the negation of her own ego, an affinity for mystery and that which lies closer to her own truth. Maintaining an open perspective, she admits the possibility of the coexistence of both, adverse to the utterance of falsehoods, she points to the existence of ambiguity and to a telling wisdom, that not everything can always be resolved. (Hood, 2009).

Encounter theory encompasses the idea of self-transcendence reflected not in abstraction, but in relationship, through close involvement with the sense world and in a demonstrated willingness on the part of the artist to surrender to the work and to experience the other side. A dynamic model, encounter theory advocates art practice that is done for its own sake, not of a having, but of a becoming in which experience is related to nothing else but itself. It is a meeting which takes shape in the spontaneity of lived experience, during moments of intensified perception of what is unique and perpetually new, before its cognitive separation by the mind into an item of use. (Buber 1967, 610-617).

During the process of filmmaking, director Terrence Malick will invariably instruct his cast in rather unorthodox fashion through impermanent poetic images in a language of transition, images that tend to change from one state to another. This was exemplified in the "*Badlands*" (1973) in which he directed Martin Sheen to "Think of the gun in your hand as a magic wand" (Martin 2006, 10).

Malick offers his actors a means of engagement which is clearly conveyed through imaginative and tangible images so that the usual dualism between actor and action can be dissolved. In this example a gun becomes a magic wand that casts spells. Malick demonstrates a directorial approach that engenders a state of openness and creativity in the filmmaking process, encouraging his actors to exercise intuition and a high level of concentration in order to function at their fullest, completely present, mentally alert and receptive to the activity at hand. (Martin, 2006). Malick nurtures an environment on set conducive of meeting, open to a chance encounter that can neither be premeditated nor assured. If the meeting were totally controlled there would be no room for encounter, all spontaneity would be lost from the relationship and the relationship would be rendered objective. Calculable and foreseeable perhaps but the life would be extinguished (Samuelson 1989, 201-201).

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that accomplished film directors exist in a fertile relationship with other outstanding artists and collaborators. In these creative alliances, when the director's vision is shared by another key creative, they are able to achieve something greater than either could achieve individually. Together, a fluent dialogue has been engaged in and transcribed to screen, a phenomenology of film linking the process of film production to its reception in which the film text is able to engage the spectator because the director, in collaboration, is able to commune with something other than themselves.

Film is an artistic medium with the potential to achieve a veritable meeting, a shared reality and a real dialogue between people. This process can be facilitated by fostering an exchange of interpersonal relation, of mutuality, engagement and reciprocity by being present and directly available. "All real living is meeting" (Buber 1958, 43) argued philosopher Martin Buber, who saw it as a process that involved the person entirely, immersed, yielding to the present moment, accepting the extinguishment of self-consciousness, free of the limitations of guise, pretention and preconceived assumption, in an experience that involves the disappearance of the self, permitting a state of encounter, authentic, whole and shared. Reality is confronted only when bound in relation, in making the other present and in being in the presence of the other. It is only when the individual accepts the other in their very otherness and on this foundation effects a penetration of the other that the sphere of their isolation may be punctured, in a specific, transforming encounter (Marcel 1967, 42).

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