## CINEMATIC PERFORMANCE: BETWEEN THE HISTRIONIC AND THE OUOTIDIAN

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A gesture expands into gymnastics, rage is expressed through a somersault Eisenstein

Cinematic performance, let us assume from the outset, is not confined to acting, nor does it necessarily privilege the human actor. Nevertheless, insofar as my interest in the topic is fueled by a curiosity about how films move spectators (the affective dimension), the body remains central to my inquiry. But how can one speak of "the body" in cinema (as though there were only one)? Or how can one ask such a general question as: "how do films move spectators?" (as though films move uniformly, and as though spectators are all moved in the same way)? Of course one cannot speak in such general terms: outside culture and history. But perhaps it is possible to delineate a kind of poetics of performance that approaches the aesthetic in theoretical terms (focusing on the production of sensory affect and knowledge), and is simultaneously alert to historical and cultural context, to contexts of reception as well as production.

The discipline of performance studies privileges the performing body as object of study but stresses the fact that the "performance text" always includes the audience. Work in this area attends not only to the signifying work of the spoken (or sung) text but also to the way the performing body produces energies and affects, which are registered somatically by the audience. In contrast, film theory for the last thirty years has concentrated on elaborating the workings of the cinematic apparatus by privileging the visual dimension, by elaborating the psychic and ideological dimensions of spectatorship. There has been little acknowledgement that to be in an audience is not merely to see but also to feel, to experience a range of somatic responses; and concomitantly there has been little attention paid to the element of pathos, that element which eludes semantic description. I believe that we in film studies can benefit from the work done by performance theorists, so long as we are wary of the fetishization of presence in that work. The emphasis in performance studies is always on "aliveness," on the almost sacred space and time in which performers and audience are simultaneously present, and on the energy that is transmitted in live performance. I would argue that this transmission of energy is not specific to live performance, that it can occur in cinema as well, and, moreover, that it generally relies upon some mode of bodily performance. But the challenge is to understand how the body in cinema can produce affects and transmit energy when it is an unreal or fictional body: cut up, dispersed, faded in, spaced out, speeded up, slowed down. But even while it is insubstantial, ephemeral, it is also indexical of the real, and it is in this tension (between the indexical and the fictional) that mimetic engagement is generated. The affect produced by cinematic bodies arises out of an imbrication of acting techniques and cinematic technologies

Contemporary Western performance theory (both film and theatre) mostly remains locked into an either-or approach as regards the nexus between performativity and engagement. Traditionally engagement and illusion are ranged on one side (under the rubric of Stanislavsky) and estrangement and contemplation on the other (under the rubric of Brecht). My desire is to understand certain cinematic modalities that defy this either-or categorization, cinematic modalities that have been neglected in contemporary theory, and for which we need to develop a critical vocabulary.

I believe that even in the most linear of films, the most representational, the rhetorical ploys are more diverse and surprising than current theoretical orthodoxy (or the critical language we have inherited from 1970s theory) allows, and also that the generation and circulation of affect has hardly been understood. Nevertheless, it might be the case that certain kinds of films, certain kinds of performance modes, might enable us to articulate new understandings. This also might involve looking at the work of earlier critics, historians and theorists, as well as investigating both the continuities and discontinuities between early cinema and more contemporary cinematic practices.

In exploring the topic of cinematic performance I have focused on three *topoi*: movement, gesture, and genre. First: to begin an exploration of movement (bodily movement in motion pictures) I focus on a particular cinematic trope, the somersault, as it occurs in a range of films. Second: gesture is of course a huge topic, but it is useful to start thinking about the history and after-life of gestural regimes in cinema. To focus this topic I have examined *The Tales of Hoffmann* (M. Powell and E. Pressburger, 1951). Third: a very loose genre is constituted by films "about" performance, a genre which I have tentatively called the "putting on a show" genre, where the show refers not just to theatre but also to film, television, dance, kung fu... My contention is that the encounter between different performative regimes and representational systems serves to dramatize enactment itself, not just on a thematic level, through narrative self-reflexivity, but by making visible the performative, and through registering the performative as a question of affect.

## Somersaults

We are watching *Blade Runner* (R. Scott, 1982). Pris, like a human missile, comes somersaulting straight towards us. One moment she is immobile (in a room full of mechanical and artificial toys, she appears to be a wax doll); the next moment she is galvanized into life, her body moving at the speed of light. The force of her somersault charges the air; reconfiguring space and time, her bodily momentum is transmitted and experienced in the auditorium as bodily sensation. My stomach lurches. How, I want to know, is this affect produced?

It might be instructive at this point to locate Eisenstein's phrase – "A gesture expands into gymnastics, rage is expressed through a somersault" – in its original context: his 1934 essay, "Through Theater to Cinema." This is a significant piece of writing because in it Eisenstein describes those theatrical experiments which brought him to the "brink of cinema." In orchestrating a stage fight in 1920 he discovered, in a moment of aber-

rant expressionism, how he could affect the audience directly, and this led to a use of the fight motif to contrast illusionary acting with "the physical fact of acrobatics." From here he started working with oppositional units, all leading to montage.

Eisenstein reminds us (in both his film making and theoretical writings) that intellectual cinema has as its correlate sensory thought or emotional intelligence. In developing an interest in the production of affect through stylized physical gesture he was influenced by a number of writers and practitioners, including William Carpenter and Ludwig Klages (as well, of course, as Meyerhold and the Proletkult Theater). Carpenter was a nineteenth century British physiologist who delineated a phenomenon subsequently named the "Carpenter Effect" - the way in which a person unconsciously mimics the movements of another person whom they are observing, as a kind of physiological reflex. Klages expanded on Carpenter's research to develop an aesthetic theory of expressive movement which suggested that images of human bodies in motion could evoke imitative ideo-motor responses in their observers.<sup>3</sup> The influence of such theories on Eisenstein can be understood not in terms of a revelation that a somersault on screen could evoke somersaults in the audience; rather, he became interested in the way in which physical gesture and bodily movement could be charged with emotion, and correlatively, the way in which emotion could be effectively transmitted via a circuit of bodily affect. Rage, for instance, configured as a stylized gesture, would be experienced via a somersaulting sensation in the viewer. In order to understand my own involuntary mimetic reaction (and to generalize a little about the moving body in cinema) I have tried to analyze the imbrication, in the series of somersaults in Blade Runner, of filmic codes with bodily performance.4

## Gestures

Gesture is only one aspect of performance, but it seems to me an *entrée*, mainly because it enables simultaneous attention to the somatic (pertaining both to the performer and the audience) and the rhetorical. Gestures are performed individually, but they are not possessed by individuals. They acquire force and significance through repetition and variation. They are never simply signs – of a singular emotion, or identity, nor an expression of the soul, but a charting of relations, imagined as well as real, interdiegetic as well as between films and audiences, stars and fans, characters and actors.

While a taxonomy of gestures (itemizing symbolic meanings and attached affects) does not seem to me very useful (because gestures in cinema are not on the whole so fixed), there is a way of refining our understanding by situating the gestural function within the context of three performative modalities (all cast in a dialectical form): histrionic/quotidian, inflation/deflation, the daily body/the extra-daily body.

The terms quotidian and histrionic serve to delineate two fundamental cinematic propensities. They are not utterly distinct, but rather two impulses always and to varying degrees present in cinema. On the one hand we can say that the cinema, since its inception, has always had a curiosity about the quotidian, a desire to scrutinize and capture the rhythms and nuances of everyday life; on the other hand, since its inception, the cinema has been driven by a tendency to theatricalization, by a "properly cinematographic theatricality," by stylization, by processes of semiotic virtuosity. In more naturalistic cinema the gestural tends towards the utilitarian and quotidian; in more

histrionic cinema the gestural tends towards the abstract, expressive and stylized. In both cases gestural inflection has the capacity to move us (viewers) in ways that involve less semantic cognition than a kind of sensory or bodily apprehension.

The terms inflation and deflation serve to designate cinematic operations, and their employment signals a shift away from a problematic of representation, and an orientation more towards rhetoric. Inflation involves an ostensive propensity, an exageration or foregrounding of the cinematic codes (color, editing, camera movement, acting ...); deflation, on the other hand, involves a playing down of the codes, an intensive, rather than ostensive, propensity.

The daily body and the extra-daily body do not serve to describe and identify persons, but rather to distinguish modes of performance. The daily body is also a gestural and cultural body, imbued with techniques that have been absorbed and learnt and which are acted out on an unconscious and habitual level. The extra-daily body is differentiated from the daily in the kind and range of techniques and the way they are deployed. This body has been produced through disciplined training, which enables a particular deployment of energy, and includes a context: the presence of an audience, and the marking out of a performance space. Eugenio Barba, from whom I have borrowed these terms, calls this a "decided" body and he writes, "The actor gives himself [sic] form and gives form to his message through fiction, by modelling his energy."

The Tales of Hoffmann seems to me a wonderful vehicle for exploring performance since it is at once so histrionic and inflated in its operations and yet so moving. This is precisely because of its imbrication of cinematic codes and actorly codes. It is full of trickery, extravagant special effects, stylized colour, artificial movement, jump cuts, magical dissolves that transform the "real" opera into a cinematic phantasmagoria. André Bazin referred to it as the creation of "an entirely faked universe...a sort of stage without wings where everything is possible."9 Elsewhere Bazin argued that the transposition of a piece of theatre to cinema is possible only on the condition that it does not cause people to forget but rather to safeguard the theatricality of the œuvre.10 We might say that Tales safeguards the operaticality of its source, but does so through subjecting the opera to certain cinematic operations that we shall name operality: operations, that is, of histrionic cinema. By naturalistic standards acting in this film is unbelievable, and yet the performances are rivetting; that is to say, they have the capacity to rivet our attention, and incite a mimetic response (kinesthetic duplication rather than psychological identification). This surely derives from Powell and Pressburger's decision to use dancers, and in the choreographing of movement to privilege the gestural.

A key to understanding *Tales* and its histrionic dimension, I argue, lies in a recognition of its genealogy, traced via the evolution of a performative dimension in nineteenth century opera, connecting to some of the tropes of silent cinema, and also to a certain avant-garde trajectory in the twentieth century that privileges the physical over the psychological, and the somatic over the semantic in the generation of affect.<sup>11</sup> In the early part of the twentieth century the modernist body began to emerge on the avant-garde stage, a body trained in techniques that both derived from forms of industrial labour (the Taylorism of Meyerhold) and from the array of physical culture movements and modern dance techniques that were proliferating in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Meyerhold articulates the nature of this new attention to the somatic register: "Just as Wagner employs the orchestra to convey emotions, I employ plastic movement [...] The essence of human relationships is determined by gestures, poses, glances and silences..."<sup>13</sup>

My suggestion is that we look to the cinema of the divas for an antecedent to the gestural quality of Tales, particularly to a figure like Lyda Borelli. In a film such as Ma l'amor mio non muore! (M. Caserini, 1913) the inexorability of fate (and attendant sensations of fear, sorrow, yearning) unrayels as much through the activity of her little finger, as through plot devices. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs point out that Borelli's performance in Ma l'amor mio non muore! is "dependent upon and facilitated by the lengthy takes and staging in depth which are typical of European cinema [of the time] more generally."14 Through extremely detailed analysis they demonstrate that she is never still, but rather moves very slowly from one pose into the next. They do not ask (this is not their concern) why and how her gestural modality is so affecting. One of the reasons is her decided body, which concentrates energy and concentrates our attention, so that we kinesthetically experience the emotional range being enacted. In particular, she utilises the technique of contra-posta or recoil. This was a modern technique based on a dynamic of resistance and yielding; it involved moving into a pose, finding the point of resistance and leaning out of it, thus concentrating and then redirecting energy. It occurs in a number of places: in the tango and its variations for instance (immortalised by another diva, Asta Nielsen, most famously in her dance in Afgrunden, U. Gad, 1910) and in the teachings of Eisenstein and Meyerhold. 15

If we read *The Tales of Hoffmann* via this genealogy (stressing on the one hand the process of reading rather than the assertion of direct influence, and on the other hand the migration of gestures across a more extensive cultural landscape than that contained by the duality of theatre and film) many of the techniques deployed by the performers, Robert Helpman in particular, become legible. Moreover, by examining an overtly histrionic film like *Tales* we can actually sharpen our analytic tools for understanding more quotidian gestures in the cinema. Take a figure like James Dean, a supposedly method actor, who adopts deflationary techniques, who reduces the space between the daily and extra-daily body, who appears to be improvising anew rather than repeating a repertoire of techniques. But look at *Rebel Without a Cause* (N. Ray, 1955) and notice how he exploits pathos through the technique of recoil.

## Genre

Innumerable films belong to the "putting on a show" genre or group, and they will not all yield the same insights; the most interesting examples for our purposes will be those that extend reflexivity beyond the diegesis and actually enact performative issues. In terms of films about film making, for instance, Stanley Kwan's *Centre Stage* (aka *The Actress*, 1992) or Olivier Assayas' *Irma Vep* (1996) yield a great deal more than Truffaut's *La Nuit Américaine* (1973). In part this is because they are intertextual and allusive of film history; they explore different styles of acting rendered through different modes of film making. Like many films dealing with theatre (think of Rivette, or Ichikawa's *An Actor's Revenge*, 1963) and some dealing with television (*The King of Comedy*, M. Scorsese, 1983; and *Bamboozled*, S. Lee, 2000) they also are implicitly about film performance.

To facilitate analysis of films within this group, and to understand how narrative and thematic concerns intermesh with performativity I propose four analytic categories: thematic motifs, generic tropes, figurative formations, performative modalities.<sup>16</sup>

Thematic motifs are grounded in the diegesis. They include: high culture versus low culture, theatre versus film, disaster versus success, public versus private. Generic tropes refer to privileged moments, iterative scenarios, dramatic dynamics which, although embedded in a narrative, have a certain recognizable autonomy as "set pieces": their function is rhetorical and generically (rather than narratively) affiliated. Included in generic tropes are: the big break, the audition, the rehearsal, opening night, kidnapping, repetition compulsion, performative objects, Springtime (this trope – short for "Springtime for Hitler" and derived from the ambivalent hit musical number of that name in *The Producers* (M. Brooks, 1968) – is a correlative of the thematic motif of disaster versus success, and it refers to the propensity of these films to invest "bad" acting, via virtuoso performance, with the power to fascinate and entertain). Figurative formations refers on the one hand to the range of stock figures – star, celebrity, producer/director, ingénue, understudy, ghost, diva – and on the other hand to the range of relations that this "cast" enables, and to the emotional tenor of these relations: admiration, love, erotic energy, emulation, envy, revenge... Performative modalities include three already mentioned – histrionic/quotidian, inflation/deflation, the daily body/the extra-daily body – as well as on-stage/off-stage, on screen/off-screen, acting/not acting, actor/role, stage/screen (which maps onto theatre versus film), self/other, performer/audience.

To give a very brief indication of how these tropes are mobilized and transformed I shall look at two pairings: 42<sup>nd</sup> Street (L. Bacon, 1933) and The Band Wagon (V. Minnelli, 1953); and All About Eve (J. L. Mankievicz, 1950) and Opening Night (J. Cassavetes, 1977).

42<sup>nd</sup> Street, as a musical and a backstage drama, introduces many of the features of the "putting on a show" genre: the *ingénue*, the big break, an on-stage/off-stage and performer/audience dialectic, and the stage/screen dynamic. Mostly the film respects the theatrical stage as the locus of performance, the stage is contained by the film frame, and through this process of duplication we, the film viewers, are positioned as analogous to the intradiegetic stage audience. The narrative moves from audition to rehearsal to the anticipation of opening night, in the course of which the diva (Bebe Daniels) twists her ankle, and the ingénue gets her big break, her man and stardom. The film concludes with the opening night of the stage show. But this opening, choreographed by Busby Berkeley, is unlike any stage show we have seen. In an unheralded and startling move the camera abandons all pretense of emulating the stage audience's point of view, and gives us a purely cinematic perspective and construction. The conjunction of cinematic technology and performing bodies gives us not the opening night of a stage show, but cinematic performativity at its most sensational. In its final 42<sup>nd</sup> Street does not represent a stage show; it enacts the cinema's capacity to transport us through space, to take us, via bodily sensation, out of our own bodies.

Twenty years later, in *The Band Wagon* characters can sing and dance off the stage. The stage is not invoked through proscenium shots (as it was initially in 42<sup>nd</sup> Street). Theatricalization of the cinema, at which Minnelli excelled, is achieved through other means: through the articulation of performing bodies and stylized *mise en scène*, for instance. The celebrated "Dancing in the Dark" number, is the inverse of Busby Berkeley: a duet, intimate, lyrical. Representationally it evokes the quotidian – one evening Fred and Cyd escape their professional lives (and the trouble they are having meshing two different performative modes) and take a horsedrawn carriage into

Central Park. But this quotidian is rendered in an inflationary manner. That is, the cinematic codes are heightened (the lighting which gives a fairybook blue to the night, the sets, the painted skyline), the extra-diegetic music ("Dancing in the Dark"). The public and private and on-stage/off-stage tropes are animated here for both narrative and performative purposes. But none of this quite explains what is so magical about the scene. I think it is because of the enactment of the difference between the quotidian and the histrionic, demonstrated through a transition from the daily to the extra daily body. Put simply it is the tension between walking and dancing. The "stars" alight from the carriage and walk towards a dance pavilion. They walk through the dancing couples; others dance, they walk, but they begin to walk in time, a lilting walk, almost a glide. Entering into a blue glade there is a moment – almost invisible, undecipherable – when the walk turns into a dance. This moment is rhymed by the ending of the dance with the step back into the carriage. When I watch this sequence, though sitting in the theatre, I feel as though my own body has been liberated from its quotidian solidity, is quietly soaring into another dimension.

All About Eve is a backstage classic: it takes many of the features of the genre and twists them. Bette Davis plays a mid-century diva, who makes every gesture matter, taking up the frame, declaring "I like to act." But, in terms of the diegesis, she is under threat. The film deploys many of the features of the genre I have outlined, but with a series of twists and inversions. The *ingénue* figure (Eve), who is also a fan, insinuates herself into the life of the star she so adores and emulates, becomes her understudy, studies her every move, gets her big break (through arranging for the star to be kidnapped), takes the star's place, and becomes a star herself. At the end of the film a new figure appears in Eve's dressing room, a young *ingénue* ... The process will be repeated. And indeed it is, or at least is continued, in *Opening Night*. The emotions of mimeticism turn to envy, malevolence, revenge (the malevolent fan is mobilized in King of Comedy,18 which also elaborates the kidnapping motif, given further fascinating twists in Bamboozled and another film about film making, Cecil B. Demented [J. Waters, 2000]). The fan (dressed just as Eve was in the beginning of All About Eve) turns up at the stage door in beginning of Opening Night – as part of a mob besieging the great actress Myrtle Gordon, played by Gena Rowlands. Shortly after this the fan is hit by a car and killed. She returns as a ghost, a malevolent ghost with whom Rowlands has to do battle, as she struggles to find a way to play, on stage, a part she finds unsympathetic. Myrtle is haunted, but the ghost has a materiality (on occasion she is embodied by an actress), and the struggles are extremely violent, visceral, shockingly affective. I have a feeling that *Opening Night* is a paradigmatic text for this study (even though it is still an experimental and exploratory study) because the way it mobilizes the daily/extra-daily body and the theatre/film modalities demonstrates that even while the cinematic body is insubstantial, ephemeral, it is also indexical of the real, and it is in this tension (between the indexical and the fictional) that mimetic engagement is generated.

I S. Eisenstein, "Through Theatre to Cinema" (1934), in J. Leyda (ed.), *Film Form*; trans. by J. Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 7. I have to admit to taking liberties here – Eisenstein only mentions the somersault in passing, but it is a charged phrase, and like

the movement itself it flies through the air, tumbles through space, escaping the static page. It is, I believe, a significant mention.

- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 3 I am grateful to Miriam Hansen, Adam Daniel and Yuri Tsivian for drawing my attention to the "Carpenter Effect" and the influence of Carpenter and Klages on Eisenstein.
- 4 L. Stern, "I Think Sebastian, Therefore I... Somersault: Film and the Uncanny," *Paradoxa*, vol. 3, nos. 3-4 (1998), pp. 348-366.
- 5 L. Stern, "Paths That Wind Through the Thickets of Things," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Fall 2001), pp. 317-354.
- 6 Deleuze discusses the notion of a "properly cinematographic theatricality" and "a theatricality of cinema totally distinct from the theatricality of the theatre (even when cinema uses it as a reference)." He is interested in what happens to various theatrical tropes, bodily postures, modes of delivery and voicing when they are "borrowed" from the theatre, but deployed differently by the cinema. He argues that the very substance of cinema, as a technology with its own potential for articulating the temporality of bodily presence (as it subsists and moves in time), produces a new theatricality with specific affects. See G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. by H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (London: The Athlone Press, 1989), p. 83.
- 7 E. Barba, Beyond the Floating Islands (New York: PAJ, 1986), p. 94.
- 8 L. Stern, "*The Tales of Hoffmann*: An Instance of Operality," in J. Joe, T. Rose (eds.), *Between Opera and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 39-57.
- 9 A. Bazin, *Radio-Cinéma-Télévision* (July 1951), cited in "Les Contes d'Hoffmann," Avant-Scène, Opera and Cinema, no. 360 (May 1987), p. 70.
- 10 A. Bazin, "Theatre and Cinema," in *What is Cinema?*, vol. 1, selected and trans. by H. Gray (Berkeley Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p. 117.
- II I do not mean to flatten out the heterogeneous range of performative modalities existing in early cinema, particularly as manifested in different national cinemas, but also across genres and sometimes within single films.
- 12 And indeed in Hollywood too. American modern dance developed in California, along with film. Body awareness was often considered more important than a background in theatre. Lillian Gish, for instance, attended the Denishawn school of dance and Ruth St Denis choreographed the Babylon sequences in *Intolerance* (D. W. Griffith, 1916), which were copied by De Mille in *Male and Female* (C.B. De Mille, 1919). See C. Olsson, "Moving Bodies," *Aura: Film Studies Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1998), p. 78.
- 13 V. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. and trans. by E. Braun (London-New York: Methuen, 1969), p. 56.
- 14 B. Brewster, L. Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 111-12.
- 15 For the tango see Y. Tsivian: Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), pp. 46-7; and "Russia, 1913: Cinema in the Cultural Landscape," in R. Abel (ed.), Silent Film, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 203-208. For recoil see A. Law, M. Gordon, Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 1996); and M. Iampolski, "Rakurs and Recoil," Aura: Film Studies Journal, vol. 4, no. 1 (1998), pp. 4-15. I am grateful to Yuri Tsivian for illuminating discussions on this topic.
- 16 L. Stern, "Putting on a Show or The After-life of Gestures," (July 2000); issue of the on-line film journal, *Senses of Cinema*: http://www.sensesofcinema.com/.
- 17 François Regnault uses this phrase in discussing Robert De Niro, in whom he detects "an

- inner jubilation." See F. Regnault, "Plaidoyer Pro Niro," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 286 (March 1978), pp. 49-51.
- 18 I discuss De Niro's histrionic disposition in "Acting Out of Character: *The King of Comedy* as a Histrionic Text," in L. Stern, G. Kouvaros (eds.), *Falling for You: Essays on Cinema and Performance* (Sydney: Power, 1999), pp. 277-305; and also in L. Stern, *The Scorsese Connection* (London-Bloomington: BFI-Indiana University Press, 1995), particularly Chapter Six.