INTRODUCTION

Walter Benjamin was right—with film, like sports, "everyone who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert."[1] Hidden in safe anonymity, sports fans confidently analyze players' strengths and weaknesses, just as film audiences blithely rate actors' performances. For decades, film stars have been the object of both scorn and adoration. By now, there is far more information about screen actors' personal lives than about the way their performance choices affect our interpretations of films. While every day thousands of words and images join the swirl of attention focused on stars' very public private lives, this book goes in a different direction. It offers ways to discuss the remarkable details of the performances we all encounter in films.

Screen performances are an integral component of film, contributing to audiences' interpretations just as framing, editing, lighting, production, and sound design do. Many filmgoers will find that idea obvious and wonder why an entire book would be devoted to clarifying just how actors' performances shape our impressions. But a complete hearing is needed. Why? Because the simple, straightforward proposal that actors' gestures and expressions are on a par with other filmic elements challenges the influential view that screen performances are created in the editing room. To suggest that acting is a component of film goes against accepted ideas about the "nature" of film and the time-honored notion that live performance is the province of "true" acting.

What caused these established positions to be at odds with the commonsense view that acting matters in film? One factor is that scholars writing about cinema have often separated acting from all other aspects of film, treating the actor's work as resistant to descriptive analysis and lacking an objective, critical vocabulary.[2] While academics readily accept that crew members rely on craft knowledge, they have often overlooked ways that screen actors use their training and experience to create vivid gestures and expressions. Another factor is that uniquely "cinematic" strategies have been seen as the foundation of "film language." Scholars agree that framing choices convey impressions, as when low-angle shots make characters seem more imposing than shots that look down on the subject. However, books on film do not discuss the way actors' use of sharp, sudden, staccato bursts of

words can often signal alarm, while smooth, sustained, legato vocal rhythms can convey moments of calm.[3]

Academic writing about stars and audiences has illuminated a great deal about films and the moviegoing experience. However, only by challenging traditional views of film and performance can one shed new light on acting in the cinema. By discussing films from different genres, periods, and national cinemas, this book looks closely at screen acting and shows how performance details interact with other filmic choices. It returns to insights on art and performance elegantly formulated by the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926–48) and draws on a circumspect selection of acting terms and concepts. With these foundations, the book gives filmgoers of all types accessible, comprehensive ways to analyze acting in the cinema.

Some might object that vocabulary developed in theater and performance studies cannot be used in film analysis because cinema and theater are entirely different art forms, cultural products, and economic industries with separate histories and audiences. They are not. Long before *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) was transformed into a Broadway production in 1994, research on "film nomenclature, production practices, consumption, and formal and stylistic elements" had clearly demonstrated that cinema shares deep affinities with theater.[4] As singular films such as *Children of Paradise* (Marcel Carné, 1945) and *Topsy-Turvy* (Mike Leigh, 1999) lovingly reveal, cinephiles not only recognize but celebrate cinema's origins in boulevard theater and comic opera.

Practitioners' shared use of acting vocabulary also warrants crossing the divide between theater and film. However, as discussions in the book will show, drawing on craft vocabulary to describe acting in individual films need not involve any claim about the techniques the actors themselves might have used. Instead, examining performances in light of terms borrowed from script analysis, for example, helps a viewer identify and reflect on the myriad acting choices in completed scenes. Similarly, using the Prague school's incisive distinction between performer and performance element leads to systematic thinking about screen acting because it clarifies, once and for all, that evocative gestures and expressions are fully present in film. Identifying "true" acting with expressive performance details illuminates the common ground between stage and screen acting that far surpasses the much discussed but finally inconsequential contrast between performers' presence on stage and absence on screen.

Essentially all of the terminology used in this book has been available for at least fifty years. One might ask: if tools for analyzing film acting were at

hand, why weren't they used? Terms and concepts that could have clarified acting's integral role were not brought into cinema studies because influential views on film and acting made it nearly impossible to take screen performance seriously. For example, in 1936 cultural theorist Walter Benjamin effectively discouraged future scholarship on screen acting when he confidently asserted that the film actor simply "represents himself to the public before the camera."[5] Describing with dismay the "mechanical contrivance" that separated actor and audience, Benjamin intoned, "Any thorough study proves there is indeed no greater contrast than that of the stage play to a work of art that is completely subject to or, like the film, founded in mechanical reproduction."[6]

Contemporary film reviews show that critics still find themselves on shaky ground when they discuss screen acting. In most cases, they give serious consideration to screen actors' work only when the films themselves have sufficient cultural cachet. For example, performances by Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio in the special-effects blockbuster *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) were not widely discussed. Even though Winslet received an Oscar nomination, critics' observations about the actors' contributions were often squeezed in as an afterthought to commentary on other aspects of the film.[7] By comparison, critics generally paid close attention to Winslet's performance in *Iris* (Richard Eyre, 2001), a literate British drama with "quality" acting guaranteed by the casting of Jim Broadbent and Dame Judi Dench.[8] Similarly, DiCaprio's film performances became a viable subject for critics after he became associated with auteur director Martin Scorsese through leading roles in *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Aviator* (2004), and *The Departed* (2006).[9]

Today's critics concentrate on performances legitimized by external validation because authorities of the past so completely discredited screen acting. In the early years of cinema, film director Vsevelod Pudovkin, playwright Luigi Pirandello, and cultural theorist Rudolf Arnheim all argued that film actors should be seen as stage props and film performances as constructed by others.[10] Echoing their positions, Walter Benjamin shared his alarm that a filmic reaction of being "startled by a knock at the door" could be created by a director firing a shot behind an actor without warning; responding to that possibility, Benjamin lamented, "Nothing more strikingly shows that art has left the realm of the 'beautiful semblance.'"[11]

With film performance anathema to several prominent figures who witnessed the rise of motion pictures, it is not surprising that anxiety about the illegitimacy of screen acting filters into even the most laudatory contempo-

rary assessments. For example, reviews of Nicole Kidman's Oscar-winning performance in *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002) praised the nuanced expressivity of her eyes, face, voice, and body but also consistently remarked on her false nose, almost as if it created Kidman's performance; as critic David Edelstein smugly observed at the time, "If she wins the Oscar, it will be by a nose."[12] Charlize Theron's Oscar-winning performance in *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003) generated the same anxiety and controversy, with much attention given to the effects created by makeup artist Toni G and Theron's weight gain. Interestingly, reviewers' doubts that Theron's portrayal could be considered acting actually prompted Roger Ebert to condemn fellow critics for suggesting that because one could identify the techniques that physically transformed Theron for the role, the actress herself had not created the performance.[13] Ebert's objection to questions about Theron's acting highlights the still uncertain status of screen performances. Are they instances of authentic acting? Or are they the result of filmmakers' sleight of hand?

Critics' lingering concerns about the legitimacy of screen acting begin to suggest the even more deeply rooted skepticism scholars have expressed about screen acting. For example, writings by film theorist Christian Metz amplified Benjamin's observation that the "audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera."[14] Still influential today, Metz formalized the position that meaning in the cinema arises primarily from shot selection and shot-to-shot relations.[15] However, his view that cinema directs spectators' interpretations by means of frame selections and editing combinations made it difficult to explain variations in viewers' responses. Efforts to explain those variations include scholarship grounded in psychoanalysis, phenomenology, feminist theory, and various forms of reception studies.

This book reckons with performance to explain variations in audience response, recognizing that interpretations of filmic gestures are influenced by viewers' personal associations with comparable social gestures and their acquaintance with the gestural conventions of pertinent aesthetic traditions. While Metz emphasized framing, editing, and the organization of looks (camera, actor/character, spectator), this book examines the specific qualities in actors' gestures and expressions that convey characters' thoughts, moods, and temperaments. Because Metz ignored performance in his focus on narrative and "cinematic" strategies, this book explores interrelations between shot selections and gesture choices, miking decisions and vocal inflec-

tions, editing patterns and differing uses of facial expression, gesture, and movement.

A full accounting of audience responses and film acting involves a thorough look at the dynamic, mutual interactions among the many elements within shots, scenes, and films. While framing and editing are not the basis of "film language," neither is performance. Rather, interactions among countless textual and extratextual factors shape audience interpretations. Composite arts such as theater and film consistently have "various systems of signs in simultaneous play," and thus require the kind of functional analysis exemplified by Prague school structuralism.[16] Prague semiotics is particularly suited to discussions of screen performance because Jan Mukařovský's 1931 essay on Chaplin's performance in *City Lights* represents "the first attempt" to apply the concept of performance element "in a concrete analysis."[17] Guided by the lucid formulations of Prague theorists, one can see how performance details extend, support, and counterbalance impressions, meaning, and significance created by other filmic choices.

Part 1 of the book examines perspectives on film and acting that have precluded effective analysis of screen performance. Examples from a range of films help to show that performances are composed of observable physical and vocal gestures that warrant analysis. Part 2 highlights acting in films from different time periods and aesthetic traditions as it outlines the way Prague theories illuminate interactions between acting and other filmic choices. Part 3 examines several contemporary films to illustrate how taxonomies developed by Delsarte, Laban, and Stanislavsky allow one to effectively describe the acting choices that convey characters' thoughts and feelings.

Together, the discussions show that rich vocabulary for analyzing film acting already exists. Practitioners, scholars, and filmgoers should find the application of Prague concepts and acting/directing terms valuable. Readers should also encounter a new vision of cinema, one that recognizes the mutual interdependence of all filmic elements. Just as editing choices are best understood when cinema is seen as a composite form that features simultaneity, redundancy, and contrast, acting choices are illuminated when they are recognized as filmic choices, connected to other screen details through changing, mutually interactive relationships of subordination, equilibrium, and parallelism.

The book aims to *reframe* screen performance by replacing, for a moment, the familiar focus on stardom with concentration on actors' observable

performance choices. Through this alternative frame, the light but sustained quality of an elderly woman's frail, clasping and unclasping hands becomes a filmic element on a par with the tight framing of the long take that draws attention to her hands. Focusing on acting rather than stars, the glazed expression in the eyes of a young man portraying a character out of his depth becomes a cinematic detail of equal importance to the camera movement that pans slowly past him. Attending to acting choices as filmic choices, one sees that the sudden rising inflection in a youngster's voice works in tandem with the cut to a close-up of the child's wide-eyed expression.

By reframing *screen* performance, the book also seeks to dispel assumptions about media specificity, modern perception, and the divide between stage and screen. While aesthetic traditions in film, television, and mediated performance art differ, all of these forms use gestures and expressions to shape audience impressions. They all combine performance details with framing, editing, and sound design choices that often enhance opportunities to search performers' gestures and expressions for emotional resonance.[18] While discussions throughout the book focus on feature films, that choice is not meant to diminish the importance of performances in other media forms. Documentaries, reality TV, televised sports, animated films, and avant-garde videos also generate a heightened interest in the minute details of gestures and expressions.

In theater and film, combinations of performance and nonperformance elements operate together to clarify and amplify the connotations already embedded in the individual components of the production. Discussions throughout the book emphasize the interlocking coordination between the various aspects of cinema because people have tended to think that films, like other aspects of modern life, simply fragment experience. While framing and editing choices can disperse attention, they also have a dialogic or reciprocal effect: the same processes that isolate sounds and images actually focus audience attention on the minute details presented moment to moment. Audiences know that emotional significance and narrative information will be doled out in bits and pieces. As a consequence, viewers notice the slightest shifts in performers' facial expressions, the smallest changes in their vocal intonations. They make meaning out of the selection and combination of all filmic details, sifting through slight changes of framing as well as changes in actors' energy.

The book also seeks to reframe screen *performance* in ways that acknowledge its multiple meanings.[19] For example, screen performances are like musical or theatrical ones in that they represent the material embodi-

ment of scores or scripts that serve as exact blueprints or open points of ref- erence. Moreover, because most films belong to narrative traditions, screen performances generally involve character portrayal in some way. Also, owing perhaps to cinema's origins in the spectacular pictorial traditions of boule- vard theater and comic opera, film performances have often featured dis- plays of exceptional skill, grace, and physical beauty. Additionally, because films frequently rely on recognizable gestures and expressions, audiences often access and interpret screen performance in light of social norms and familiar human behavior. At the same time, screen performances reflect surrounding aesthetic traditions and conventions of individual cinematic genres; as a consequence, audiences who care about film and the perform- ing arts most deeply enjoy the craft in screen performances. This book en- deavors to extend that appreciation of acting in the cinema by illustrating ways to analyze and discuss screen performances with other actors, direc- tors, scholars, and filmgoers.[20]