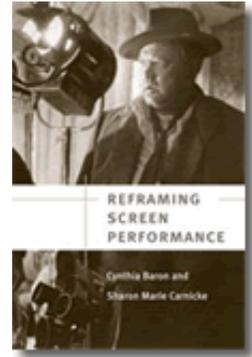


Q&A with Cynthia Baron, co-author of *Reframing Screen Performance*

Are screen actors just playing themselves? Can film acting be considered "true" acting? Are there ways to describe the acting choices we see in films? These are some of the questions Cynthia Baron and Sharon Carnicke address in their new book, *Reframing Screen Performance*.



The authors draw on new evidence to dispel some deep-rooted misconceptions about film acting. From there, they explore film performances using accessible terms developed by actors, directors, and a handful of scholars in theatre and film. They show that viewers' interpretations are shaped by everything on screen, including the gestures and expressions that work in concert with framing, editing, lighting, sound, and visual design. The book's many case studies, illustrated with some fifty frame captures, reveal that the expressive details of actors' bodies, faces, and voices are best understood as part of films' narrative and audiovisual design.

Reframing Screen Performance discusses performances by Julianne Moore, Ethan Hawke, Gena Rowlands, Forest Whitaker, and others. It considers acting in films by directors such as Baz Luhrmann, Sally Potter, Robert Altman, Akira Kurosawa, and Orson Welles. Looking at scenes in more than forty films from different time periods and national cinemas, the book challenges conventional approaches to film by advancing the simple yet revolutionary idea that acting is one of cinema's essential aspects.

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University of Michigan Press: *Your book discusses film acting. Isn't that something we're all quite familiar with?*

Cynthia Baron: In some sense, absolutely. As Walter Benjamin explained in the 1930s, watching films is like watching sports; he pointed that "everyone who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert."

So, like sports fans who confidently discuss players' strengths and weaknesses, as people who have logged thousands of film and TV hours, we believe we can and should rate actors' performances. Also, our sense that we're experts about film acting and film actors has to do with the huge amounts of media coverage of stars' very public private lives.

But here's the catch, does this 24/7 access give us any information about the way acting choices affect our interpretations of films? Do we have ways to describe the actual details of the performances we encounter in films? Not really, and so there is a need for a book that makes film acting legible, something we can discuss as an aspect of film.

UMP: *You mention that all the information about stars has not given us ways to talk about film performances. Do you see that problem cropping up in film reviews?*

CB: Yes, actually. Even recent reviews reveal that critics generally give serious attention to actors' work only when the films themselves have cultural cachet. For example, the performances by Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio in *Titanic* (1997) were not widely discussed, and while Winslet received an Oscar nomination, positive comments about the acting were generally squeezed in as an afterthought.

But by comparison, critics paid close attention to her performance in *Iris* (2001), which had its "quality" acting guaranteed by the casting of Jim Broadbent and Dame Judi Dench. Also, DiCaprio's performances only became a viable subject for critics after he became associated with director Martin Scorsese through leading roles in *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Aviator* (2004), and *The Departed* (2006).

Similarly, critics' concerns about the legitimacy of screen acting can be found, for instance, in reviews of Nicole Kidman's Oscar-winning performance in *The Hours* (2002) – they all praise the expressivity of her eyes, face, and voice but also consistently remark on her false nose, as if it had created her performance.

Charlize Theron's Oscar-winning performance in *Monster* (2003) generated that same anxiety, with attention given to her makeup and weight gain. Interestingly, reviewers' focus on these things prompted Roger Ebert to condemn his fellow critics for suggesting that the actress had not created the performance simply because the techniques that physically transformed her could be identified.

For me, this sort of controversy highlights the still uncertain status of film performances, with alleged "experts" continuing to ask: are they instances of authentic acting? Or are they simply the result of filmmakers' sleight of hand?

UMP: *Your book suggests that we actually pay close attention to the performances we see in films. If that's the case, how did we get into the situation where even critics are unsure about the status of film acting?*

CB: That is strange, isn't it? For most moviegoers, it's pretty obvious that film performances contribute to audience interpretations. However, the idea that actors' gestures and expressions are on a par with other filmic elements presents a serious challenge to the entrenched 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.

As to why these established positions are at odds with the commonsense view that acting matters in film – one reason is that people writing about cinema have traditionally separated acting from other aspects of film.

While it's assumed that directors, editors, cinematographers and other members of the crew rely on craft knowledge, many people do not recognize that film actors use their training and experience to create the required gestures and expressions.

This position can be traced back to "experts" like Pudovkin, Pirandello, and theorist Rudolf Arnheim, who, early on, argued that film actors should be seen as stage props. Echoing that view, Walter Benjamin asserted that the film actor does not act but instead simply "represents himself to the public before the camera."

That total dismissal of screen acting carried into the work of film theorist Christian Metz, who amplified Benjamin's observation that the "audience's identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera."

Still remarkably influential, Metz formalized the position that meaning in the cinema arises primarily from shot selection and shot-to-shot relations, that is, from framing and editing. The suggestion is that the content of the shot, what's pictured, means nothing and has no effect on audience interpretations.

UMP: So how have you and others contended with that view?

CB: The position that Metz put forward made it difficult to explain variations in audience responses, and so for the last thirty years, a great deal of energy has gone into work that focuses on what audiences bring to film, how their personal and social experiences shape their interpretations and responses. This has been extremely productive work.

However, some things have been left out - what do people pay attention to when they watch films; does the content of shots really mean nothing to audiences; with so much interest in stars, don't their performances count for something?

The book sets out to answer those questions, focusing on screen acting as a way to address variations in audience responses. Drawing on cultural studies, it acknowledges that interpretations are colored by several factors. These include: viewers' personal associations with gestures in a scene, their familiarity with the social gestures used in the performances, and their acquaintance with the larger cultural and aesthetic conventions that influence acting choices in a film.

However, in contrast to Metz, who considered the look of the camera, character, and spectator, our book focuses on the specific qualities in actors' gestures and expressions that convey characters' thoughts, feelings, and temperaments.

In contrast to Metz, who emphasized framing and editing, our book highlights relationships between shot selections and gesture choices, making decisions and vocal inflections, editing patterns and actors' movement – all of this to give readers new insights into the way all of the aspects of film, including performance, figure into audience interpretations.

UMP: So, the book looks at acting in order to shed light on why people respond to films as they do. Did you have certain readers in mind when you wrote the book?

CB: That's a question that Sharon and I thought about a great deal. First, we recognize there are scores of people who have a great wealth of knowledge about films, and that there are other general readers who have a genuine and longstanding interest in actors and acting.

To show that understanding film performances can enhance the experience of watching movies and that films provide a wonderful opportunity to study great performances, the book includes a few chapter-length case studies. One is on *Smoke*, an independent film by Wayne Wang that has brilliant ensemble performances. Another is on *Training Day*, Antoine Fuqua's noir thriller that provided the occasion for Denzel Washington's long-deserved Academy Award. A third looks at *The Grifters*, a film about small-time con artists that features Anjelica Huston and John Cusack.

Now in these case studies, we discuss the performances using terms that practitioners developed to analyze scripts and notate human movement because the book is also designed for actors and directors at various stages in their careers.

With those readers in mind, the book also features a number of comparative studies that highlight the logic of acting choices. For instance, to illustrate the influence of cultural and aesthetic traditions, one chapter compares acting choices in the Japanese classic *Seven Samurai* with contrasting performance details in the American remake *The Magnificent Seven*. Another chapter examines a series of adaptations of *Hamlet* and of *Romeo and Juliet* to show how acting choices change to suit evolving conventions of framing, editing, and sound. Actors and filmmakers have told me that these comparative studies really help to clarify how acting choices can and do interact with other filmic details to create audience impressions.

UMP: And then what about people writing about film?

CB: The book is also for people who are willing to rethink assumptions about acting in the cinema. So, to begin dismantling the idea that film acting is just "natural" behavior captured and manipulated by technology, Chapter 1 analyzes press coverage about "manufactured starlets" and young men who simply "learn the tricks of the trade."

Chapter two continues to debunk myths about screen acting by sharing long-overlooked information about Lev Kuleshov's appreciation of film actors and his investment in actor training. This is significant because Kuleshov is wrongly thought to have "proved" that film performances are created by editing.

To identify existing problems and begin building new ways of looking at film acting, chapter three discusses scenes in *The Player*, *Touch of Evil*, *Masculine-Feminine*, and *Personal Velocity* to illustrate distinctions between performance details – which are present in films – and things like character, actor, and star image, which belong to the very different realms of fictional world, daily life, and cultural discourse.

Then, to flesh out new ways of approaching performance, chapter four introduces readers to work by Prague School theorists. Chaplin's film *City Lights* has been selected as this

chapter's case study to acknowledge that Jan Mukarovsky's 1931 essay on *City Lights* represents not only the first but also one of the most salient attempts to describe the role and function of performance elements, which, in contrast to character and actor, are the concrete, observable details that extend, support, and counterbalance impressions created by other filmic choices. Like other Prague theorists, Mukarovsky is someone whose work warrants much more consideration than it has received.

UMP: Picking up on that idea, the book presents film acting in ways not found elsewhere. What do you think is unique about the book?

CB: First, *Reframing Screen Performance* dispels the myth that technology creates acting in film. Turning this misconception on its head, the book's case studies show that framing and editing choices generally facilitate our interest in studying human expression; the examples reveal that choices about framing, editing, lighting, and so on often serve to focus audience attention on actors' gestures and expressions.

With this evidence at hand, readers should be able to 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 art form that features simultaneity, redundancy, and contrast, acting choices are also best understood when they are seen as filmic elements that are combined with choices about framing, editing, and so on in relationships of subordination, equilibrium, and parallelism.

Overall, the book challenges the standard opposition between "present" stage actors and "absent" screen actors by showing that performance details are present in films the same way that lighting, framing, and editing choices are.

It makes the case that acting choices in film acquire dramatic significance the same way that they do in theatre: through their relationship to the production's other formal elements and their connection to audiences' personal and cultural associations.

And it proposes that acting per se can be seen as discernable human action that is infused with connotations conveyed by the quality of actors' gestures and expressions.

UMP: So, in addition to taking on these scholarly debates, how does the book address the interests of general readers?

CB: I always come back to the idea that we all watch performances on stage, in movies, on television, and even in YouTube clips; we listen to expressive voices in music, whether it's at a concert or a club or in the car or on an iPod; and we all pay close attention to the gestures, expressions, inflections, and intonations of those around us, we want to know what that change of expression in someone's eyes means.

While *Reframing Screen Performance* does not attempt to address performance in that vast sense, it does suggest ways to stop for a minute and reflect on what we actually pay

attention to when we go to the movies, what we respond to when we watch films, and what we use as evidence for our interpretations about characters and their situations.

Taking a moment to think about screen acting is worth the effort. Students in my courses consistently discover that analyzing performances gives them deeper insights into films and that it's not complicated. With just a few details called to their attention, such as the inter-relationships among acting, framing, editing, and sound design choices, and after a brief introduction to Laban Movement Analysis and Stanislavsky's script analysis terms, students get an immediate boost in their enjoyment and understanding.

One reason this sort of work is so rewarding for them is that focusing on acting choices actually allows them to draw on tacit knowledge they acquired from watching films and from living in human society, both of which require interpreting other people's gestures and expressions. With this in mind, my hope is that *Reframing Screen Performance* will give readers a way to access their wealth of knowledge about films and human behavior.

Read more about *Reframing Screen Performance* at
www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=104480.