

MORE THAN FIFTEEN MINUTES OF FAME

The Evolution of Screen Performance

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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Abstract

The dominant discourse of screen acting has always revolved around a commitment to transparent philosophical realism which is grounded in notions of authenticity, coherence and the existence of a deep, unifying vein of human nature – our own and that of the characters we see on screen. The philosophical position of realism is typically associated with the Stanislavskian system of acting. In spite of its apparent naturalness, however, this code of performance has been subject to continuous questioning with subtle, and at times not-so-subtle consequences. This thesis explores the trajectory of these challenges to realism within the specific context of screen performance.

Departures from the dominant code of psychological realism in screen acting can broadly be accounted for by changes to prevailing philosophical perspectives which bring the interrelated notions of the unified subject and realism into question. Shortly after the invention of cinema, the unified subject begins to be conceptualized as either a psychoanalytical or an ideological subject with correspondent manifestations in the nature of screen performance – typified most vividly by the psychoanalytic emphasis inherent in Method acting and the making-strange techniques of anti-realist formalism respectively. Other developing philosophical fashions similarly have consequences for screen performance: The psychoanalytic and ideological subject gives way to the split subject of Lacan and the schizological subject of R.D. Laing, both of which have the effect of shifting the locus of performance towards the exteriority of the subject rather than its interiority. The elegant correspondence between philosophical fashions and screen performances begins to break down once the notion of screen performance becomes involuted and screen performance itself emerges as a focus of philosophical interest due to the growing importance of screen

media in cultural studies and in our everyday lives. This moment is accompanied by an ever-increasing degree of self-reflexivity in films and performances while postmodern philosophical perspectives, such as those of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, Baudrillard and others, gradually dissolve the subject into a multiplicity of non-unified parts.

The overall philosophical and cultural trajectory that I describe takes us away from notions of subjective depth and interiority (which are the hallmarks of both humanism and realism) towards an emphasis on surfaces and the exteriorization of experience. I propose that this cultural trend impels us towards a need to perform our identities in exteriority and, as a consequence, that the notion of having some kind of “media presence” is increasingly becoming the currency by which we validate ourselves as individuals. At the same time, however, I also argue that a tension remains between this self-reflexive/postmodern tendency to create and perform versions of self, and the persistence of an existential anxiety about individual identity and authenticity. I conclude that this tension drives many contemporary screen performances, including those performances that we have recently begun to describe as “user generated”.

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