

Richard de Cordova

THE DISCOURSE ON ACTING

MOVING PICTURES EXISTED FOR over a decade before anything resembling a star system appeared. Although personalities from other fields (particularly politics) were presented in documentary "views" from a very early date, they were not in any strict sense of the term movie stars. The basis of their notoriety lay elsewhere. One can cite, as an example, the series of five films Edison copyrighted in 1899 documenting Admiral Dewey's role in the Spanish-American War (largely the parade upon his return). Although the cinema certainly capitalized upon Dewey's notoriety, it had neither a direct role in creating it nor the means to control it. The fame of personalities such as Dewey was caught up in a circulation of events exterior to the cinema as an institution.

The cinema's function in relation to these personalities was, in a sense, merely to represent them. Dewey, McKinley, Roosevelt, and Prince Henry were the raw material in what was principally a new form of photojournalism. This cannot be said of stars such as Florence Lawrence and Mary Pickford, who emerged out of an explicitly fictional mode of film production. The spectator did not pay to see a record of Mary Pickford's movements, but paid, rather, to see her activity in the enunciation of a fiction.

There was thus no simple continuity between the intermittent representations of these famous figures and the star as such. Nor did these representations in any clear way mark out the conditions for the emergence of the star. In fact, one cannot locate the incipience of the star system in the industry's practices prior to 1907.

Of course the question this raises is why the cinema did not have a star system before this date. The theater, vaudeville, and professional sports all banked on the ability of name performers to attract an audience. The theater had, in fact, based its popularity on star performers through much, if not most, of the nineteenth century. According to Benjamin McArthur, a theatrical star system had begun to gain momentum in America with George Frederick Cook's 1810 tour. By the 1870s,

certainly, a star system dominated American theater. Star-centered combination tours were driving local stock companies out of business, and "matinee idols" such as Harry Montague (and later Kyle Bellew and Maurice Barrymore) were being hounded by hundreds of ardent female fans. In the 1880s and 1890s, Charles Frohman achieved unparalleled success as a theatrical producer by using the expanding press and the techniques of modern advertising to make stars out of Maude Adams, Ethel Barrymore, May Robson, and William Faversham. By the end of the century the theatrical star system was operating at full force.¹

It might seem natural then that the cinema—from the beginning—would have adopted a similar strategy. But it is a mistake to assume that this presented itself as an option for the early leaders of the industry. Given the nature of the industry at the time and the early film's status as discourse, the movie star, as it would later develop, was in a very real sense unthinkable. Between 1898 and 1906 the film industry depended wholly upon such institutions as vaudeville and amusement parks as its means of exhibition. Moving pictures had a relatively restricted role in vaudeville. They were not incorporated into it as a means of mechanically reproducing the labor of star acts (so that those acts could appear in a number of theaters at once, in absentia). Although Edison's early films did present snippets of vaudeville acts and playlets, they did not catch hold in any profound way; they were soon superseded when documentary views of exterior objects and events proved more interesting. These topical genres, which dominated film production during this period, had, at best, an oblique relation to that part of the vaudeville commodity that depended upon name performers. Moving pictures were a replacement for certain vaudeville acts only in a broad, structural sense: they occupied a particular slot in the show (that which had been typically occupied by other visually oriented acts, such as pantomime spectacle, puppetry, and tableaux vivants) and fit into a tradition of entertainment that melded scientific gadgetry and visual novelty.² They did not replace live acts by transferring them to the screen.

Thus, owners of vaudeville houses did not see in the reproducibility of moving pictures a kind of Benjaminian solution to the increasing demand and competition for live acts. Their interest in the kinoscope was more immediate. They saw it as a genuine novelty that, for a time at least, would attract a crowd. At first, the novelty of the cinema followed from its capacity to represent iconic movement of any kind. The kinoscope appeared as the most sophisticated version of a long line of nineteenth-century devices, whose purpose was to do precisely this. It is not clear how long this novelty propelled interest in the cinema. Robert C. Allen argues that by 1897 "moving picture acts based their appeal less on the cinema's ability to render highly iconic representations and more on the subject matter which was represented." The system of genre that emerged and predominated film production during these years attests to this. Genres such as the documentary, travel film, newsreel, and sports film (which together accounted for 86.9 percent of production) were both characterized and differentiated by their reference to a particular field of objects and events.³

Still one cannot dismiss the continuing effectivity of the novelty of the technological base. The trick film (which gained popularity around 1901), although it recalled certain traditions of stage magic, depended wholly on the magical qualities of the cinematic apparatus for its effect. Even the topical film, to the extent that it represented extraordinary events, focused a good measure of attention onto the ability of the machine to "capture" them.

The question here is not whether spectators paid to see "content" or whether they paid to see the marvelous workings of the machine – they obviously paid to see both. The kinetoscope held the spectators' attention between these poles in a kind of "economy." What is important to note is that this economy precluded the kind of attention that would be the precondition for the emergence of the star – that is, an attention to the human labor involved in the production of film. Eric Smoodin has convincingly argued that early journalistic discourse of the time characterized film as a product independent of human labor.⁴ What he calls a "reification of the apparatus" is clear in the titles of articles such as "Moving Pictures and the Machines Which Create Them" and "Revelations of the Camera." Such articles posited the apparatus as the singular site of textual productivity.

Thus, the enunciative position that the vaudeville performer occupied on stage was not replicated in the enunciative system of film. The activity behind a particular representation was relegated to the workings of the machine, not to the "creative" labor of humans. The kind of emphasis that would permit the emergence of the star system was impossible under these conditions.

A number of sweeping changes began to take place in the industry after 1905. The first and most important of the changes was undoubtedly the emergence of the nickelodeon as the dominant means of film exhibition. For the first time the cinema had its own exhibition outlet. This prompted a certain reorganization of the relation between production, distribution, and exhibition. As Robert C. Allen has pointed out,

The use of films in vaudeville did not require a division of the industry into distinct production, distribution and exhibition units. In fact, it favored the collapsing of these functions into the "operator," who, with his projector, became the self-contained vaudeville act. It was not until American cinema achieved industrial autonomy with the advent of store-front movie theaters that a clear separation of functions became the dominant mode of industrial organization, and film entered its early industrial phase.⁵

(One can see in the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company in 1908 (and in fact in the earlier alliance between the Edison licensees and the Film Service Association) an attempt by the manufacturers to regularize the relations between production, distribution, and exhibition. It is, of course, no accident that this attempt at "industrial reform" was designed to form a monopoly and secure enormous profits for the producers. The Patents Trust later argued that its actions had been beneficial in that it had organized a set of chaotic practices that were hindering the expansion of the industry. And there is no doubt some truth to this.

The nickelodeon boom brought with it an exponential rise in the demand for moving pictures – a demand that the industry, as it was structured at the time, could not efficiently supply. There had been few nickelodeons prior to 1905 but by 1907 there were, by the most conservative estimates, at least 2,500. Each of these nickelodeons needed new films on a regular basis. So, a more systematic means of getting films into distribution channels and into the theaters was in order. And of course the production process itself had to be accelerated substantially. Some of the most significant changes that took place during these years stemmed from the manufacturers' attempts to meet the rising demand for films. They built more studios, set up

property departments, and formed stock companies. In short, they instituted more factorylike methods to assure a regular, adequate flow of films.

Crucial to this move toward more rationalized production practices was the shift toward fictional film production. This shift began around 1902, but reached an important point of consolidation in the years 1907 and 1908. Robert C. Allen has argued that "between 1907 and 1908 a dramatic change occurred in American Motion Picture Production. In one year narrative forms of cinema (comedy and dramatic) all but eclipsed documentary forms in volume of production." Even more remarkably, the percentage of dramatic production increased from 17 to 66 percent in 1908. Allen's figures come from a consideration of copyrighted titles during those years. Charles Musser has demonstrated, by looking at the amount of footage distributed (fiction films were longer and more prints of each film were distributed), that the economics of the industry had turned toward fiction somewhat earlier, certainly by 1904.⁶ But he notes the uneven development that existed between filmmaking, which "remained a cottage industry," and exhibition, "which had become a form of mass production." It is in 1907 and 1908 that film production caught up, instituting a mode of fictional filmmaking (Musser refers to it, in quotation marks, as the "Griffith mode") based on standardization, narrative efficiency, and maximization of profits. For Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, it is during these years that the primitive cinema began to give way to a mode of filmmaking that would lead to a standardized, classical style. As films lengthened, more complex narratives began to be constructed around the psychological traits of characters, and a mode of editing and shot distance emerged that stressed, beyond all else, the linearity of the narrative and the characters' goals in propelling it forward. D. W. Griffith's work at Biograph, which began in late 1908, offers the clearest and most familiar evidence of this new mode.⁷

Allen argues that this shift toward fictional production was at least in part the industry's attempt to gain control over the production situation. Prior to this shift, when topical genres dominated production, the popularity of moving pictures depended all too much upon events the industry had no control over – wars, disasters, coronations, etc. The fictional film lent itself to a more rationalized set of procedures. Production could be centralized and a rough but more efficient division of labor put in place. More important, the availability of good subjects would be a matter of imagining them, rather than finding them in the world. By focusing on fictional production the industry changed the status of film as a commodity in such a way that it could assert a greater degree of control over its defining features as a commodity. Events exterior to the cinema would no longer have such a profound and potentially devastating effect on the popularity of moving pictures. Films would be differentiated from one another by factors largely internal to, and within the control of, the cinema as an institution.

Of course, as long as the supply of films from producers was sporadic and the demand great, the problem of product differentiation fell most pointedly on the shoulders of the exhibitors. By 1907 the incredible proliferation of nickelodeons had saturated the market for moving pictures in most urban areas, causing increased competition among exhibitors for a limited number of customers. In such cases, the individual nickelodeon's success became dependent upon the extent to which it could differentiate the service it offered from that of its competitors.

Such differentiation could be effected in three ways. First of all, the physical setting of the nickelodeon could be upgraded. Exhibitors discovered that the crowded, dusty storefront (the stereotypical nickelodeon) could not compete with more comfortable, opulent moving picture theaters. The latter were not only more attractive to regular nickelodeon customers, but they also drew in a more upscale audience that perhaps enjoyed moving pictures in vaudeville but (because of class divisions) had been left out of the initial nickelodeon boom.⁸

Second, vaudeville acts could be introduced back into moving picture presentations. This happened increasingly after 1907 and culminated in small-time vaudeville, which interspersed film and vaudeville acts in larger capacity theaters. The theater was one aspect of this scheme, but exhibitors could also attract customers with the quality of their live acts.

Finally, exhibitors could attempt to offer either more frequent program changes or better films than their competitors. Unfortunately, this strategy involved factors over which the exhibitor typically had very little control. A regular flow of films was often very difficult to come by. Furthermore, the manufacturers were not putting out a product that was designed to give the exhibitor leverage in this increasingly competitive situation. This is not to say that all of the films were bad or that all were the same. The point is that the shift toward fictional film production did not automatically bring with it a system of product differentiation commensurate with the needs of the exhibitors.

It should be noted that the labor involved in moving pictures – to the extent that it was emphasized – appeared at the level of exhibition. In the early days of the cinematograph the moving picture “act” consisted not only of the film but of the projectionist as well, and lecturers often accompanied films with commentary throughout this period. Thus, a live entertainer, much in the tradition of vaudeville, held an intermediary position between the audience and the film. With the star system, we see a shift of attention away from this performance at the level of exhibition and toward the labor that began to manifest itself at the level of production – that is, the performance of those who appeared in films.

It is in this context that one must view the earliest appearance of the discourse on acting. Around 1907 a number of articles began to appear that placed into the foreground the role of human labor in the production of film. This should not be viewed as a demystification of the means of production but rather as the regulated appearance of a certain kind of knowledge. This knowledge entered into a struggle destined to resituate the site of textual productivity for the spectator away from the work of the apparatus itself. A number of potential “sites of productivity” were involved in this struggle – the manufacturer, the cinematographer (or director), and the photoplaywright, but of course it was the actor/star that finally became central in this regard.

In May of 1907 a series of articles began to appear in *Moving Picture World* entitled “How the Cinematographer Works and Some of His Difficulties.” These articles offered a general account of the labor involved in producing films and focused a large measure of attention on the labor of those who appeared in films. The first installment began,

Should you ever seek the source of the moving pictures of the vaudeville theater, you will learn that the comic, the tragic, the fantastic, the mystic scenes so swiftly enacted in photographic pantomime are not real but

feigned. You will find that the kinetoscopic world is much like the dramatic, that it has its actors and actresses, its playwrights and stage directors, its theatrical machinery, its wings, its properties, its lights, its tricks, its make-ups, its costumes, its entrances and its exits.⁹

In exposing the creative labor at the “source” of the moving picture, the article makes a direct appeal to a theatrical model. The reader is told that those who appear on screen are actors and is to assume, it seems, that their activity is acting. This, however, becomes somewhat problematic if we believe the definition of the “picture performer” given in the next installment of the series:

Those who make a business out of posing for the kinetoscope are called ‘picture performers’ and many a hard knock they have to take. Practically all of them are professional stage people, and while performing on Broadway at night they pick up a few dollars day times in a moving picture studio. In a variety show, therefore, it sometimes happens that the same tumblers who a moment ago were turning handsprings and somersaults in real life, again appear in such roles as the traditional “Rube” and the “green goods man,” but only in a phantom form upon the pictured screen.¹⁰

We can see something of a retreat from a theatrical model in this passage. Although the article claims that the performers are professional stage people, the example that follows seems to indicate that their stage is that of vaudeville, not theater. Acting is not mentioned here. Those who occupy the “traditional roles” are not actors, but tumblers.

It is not difficult to understand why the labor involved in the production of film would be symbolized through a comparison with the vaudeville act. The moving picture industry retained strong institutional ties to vaudeville, even though the nickelodeon was strongly challenging vaudeville as the dominant outlet of exhibition. As the quotation indicates, moving pictures had typically appeared alongside live vaudeville acts. It seems quite logical that the activity of the “picture performer” would, from the start, be set within the tradition of performance that characterized vaudeville.

However, it was a discourse on acting and therefore a theatrical model that would, over the next couple of years, define and determine the enunciative status of those who appeared in films. The above passage demonstrates, among other things, the equivocation with which this discourse was put forward. One notes a certain tentativeness in the symbolization of the performer’s labor in terms of acting in much of the writing of the period. Acting was a profession associated with the legitimate stage, and the contention that people acted in films was neither immediately apparent nor altogether unproblematic. As we shall see later, the “film actor” emerged in a particularly contradictory field of discourses and traditions of entertainment.

“How the Cinematographer Works and Some of His Difficulties” appeared as an initiatory attempt to define and situate the work of those involved in the production of moving pictures. In particular, these articles (and others like them that began to appear in the last half of 1907) worked to constitute the “picture performer” or “film actor” as a subject of discourse. In so doing, they precipitated a significant shift in the enunciative status of film. Much of the knowledge that emerged about the picture performer in these early articles proceeded through a highly conventionalized form of

narrative. The same type of stories appear again and again in explanations of the performer's work. All of the stories were predicated on the distinction drawn in the previous passage between the "phantom form on the screen" and the real performer and, more generally, between the filmic and profilmic.¹¹ The real performer's role in the profilmic event was the subject of all of these stories.

Note, for instance, this description of the filming of a bank robbery scene:

In the most realistic way, the "robbers" broke into the bank, held up the cashier, shot a guard "dead" who attempted to come to the rescue, grabbed up a large bundle of money, and made their escape. Thus far all went well. The thieves were running down the street with the police in pursuit, just as the picture had been planned, when an undertaker, aroused by the racket, looked out of his shop. One glance sufficed to tell him that the time had come at last when he might become a hero. The "robbers" were heading toward him, and, leaping into the middle of the sidewalk, he aimed a revolver at the foremost fugitive with the threat: "Stop, thief, or I'll blow your brains out."¹²

The undertaker apprehended both of the bandits and refused to release them until he was convinced, by the head of the bank, that the robbery was staged.

Another story is prefaced by the following claim: "It may sometimes be said that the picture performer becomes so engrossed in his work that he forgets that he is simply shamming."¹³ What follows is a story about the filming of a scene in which the hero must rescue a drowning girl. A crowd of bystanders who thought the girl was really drowning jumped into the lake to rescue her. The hero seemed to forget it was all an act, and — not to be outdone by his competition — raced to rescue the girl.

Both of these stories play upon a confusion between the filmic, the profilmic, and the real, but they do so primarily as a way of making distinctions between the three. The possibility of these distinctions was a necessary condition for the emergence of the picture performer. First of all, this emergence depended upon a knowledge of the performer's existence outside of the narrative of the film itself. By introducing the contingency of the profilmic event into what is otherwise a simple retelling of the (planned) narrative of the film, these stories differentiate the profilmic from the filmic and ascribe the former a relatively distinct status. Another narrative is set forth (separable from that of the film) that takes as its subject the performer's part in the production of film. These stories not only distinguish the profilmic from the filmic, they also, more obviously perhaps, distinguish the profilmic from the real. In straightening the two out the performer — and the reader — must confront the fictional status of that which is photographed by the camera.

The attention to the fictiveness of the scenes enacted in moving pictures had a direct bearing on the status of those who appeared in films, because it worked to establish the filmed body as a site of fictional production. It would be wrong to suggest that the body had not supported fictional material prior to 1907 because much evidence exists to the contrary. However, many of the early articles that described the work of those who appeared in films (such as "How the Cinematographer Works and Some of His Difficulties") were clearly under the sway of — or at least struggling with — a quite different, more established conception of the filmed body.

This conception was rooted in a photographic tradition and is manifested most clearly in the use of the verb *pose* in many of these early articles. In photography the pose is, in a sense, the limit of the body's complicity with the act of representation. The photograph may be posed or unposed, but it is not, within dominant practice at least, anything else. The verb *pose* may have described fairly unproblematically the nature of the activity of those who were represented in the topical, "documentary" films that dominated production prior to 1907. But it did not adequately account for the activity of those who appeared in dramatic or comedic films, because the pose does not usually carry connotations of a fictional production. The posed body is admittedly a highly conventionalized one; as Barthes has noted, in posing one transforms oneself in advance into an image.¹⁴ Yet it is only in the context of the tension between the conventionality of the pose and the existence of a more spontaneous bodily identity that the "truth" of the pose is typically called into question. The more fundamental belief that the photograph represents something real remains undisputed. The fact that a picture is posed does not therefore necessarily lead to the conclusion that it is less real, that it is fictional or faked.

The shift in the status of the filmed body after 1907 was built precisely on this conclusion, however. Although the photographic conception of the body retained a kind of currency, it could not unproblematically accommodate the activity of those who were engaged in the presentation of a fiction. From 1907 we can see a kind of struggle between a photographic conception of the body and a theatrical one – between posing and acting. The ascendancy of the latter followed in part because it could account for the body as the site of a fictional production.

A correlation obviously exists between the consolidation of fictional filmmaking in 1907 and 1908 and the emergence of the discourse on acting. How is this correlation to be understood? Was the discourse on acting caused by this shift in production or vice versa? One must guard against these overly simple views to stress the complexity of the interaction between these two levels.

The fictional film existed long before the notion that people acted in films. As we have seen, the discourse on acting only appeared at the point at which the fiction film became the dominant, standardized product of the manufacturers. I have argued that the increasing dominance of the fictional film rendered the photographic conception of the body ("posing," "modeling") problematic and called for a model that could account for the body as a site of a fictional production. The theatrical model – and "acting" – met this requirement (as did other designations such as "faking" and, more ambiguously, "performing"). Insofar as it did, the discourse on acting can be seen as a response to the shift in film production. However, it would be a mistake to assume that the discourse on acting was simply a descriptive response. Although "acting" could account for the fictional status of the filmed body, in other respects it was an inappropriate description of the activity of those who appeared in films between 1907 and 1909. The moving pictures of the time generally provided little evidence to support acting's associations with art, expression, and interiority.

In fact, much writing of this period implicitly called into question the descriptive capacity of the discourse on acting: "the repertoire actor has discovered a new use for his talents. He is now a moving picture. That is, he now poses for moving pictures. By lying down, rolling over and jumping in front of the camera he is able to earn in three days a sum equal to a week's salary at his former industry."¹⁵ Although the writer

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acknowledges that actors appear in films he must, for obvious reasons, stop short of claiming that their activity is acting. "Lying down, rolling over and jumping" are not what one thinks of when one thinks of an acting performance. Yet it was this kind of broad action (however parodically it is portrayed here) that characterized most of the films of the day.

For this reason, writers often made the claim that people acted in films with a marked degree of irony or irresolution. The word *actor* (and *artist*), for instance, usually appeared in quotation marks in these early articles. Note the following description of the making of a fiction film: "A man skilled at the business will impersonate the miserable husband in the case and a vaudeville actress temporarily out of work will play the role of the wife. Having secured permission of the city authorities to have a lot of sham disorder in the streets, the head man sends out photographers and 'actors.'"¹⁶ The quotation marks allow the writer to assert that actors appear in films while acknowledging the problematic status of that assertion – and in fact making a joke out of it.

A similar tack is taken by Walter Prichard Eaton in "The Canned Drama." Eaton begins by describing an encounter with a professional actor friend who had turned to moving picture work. Yet, later in the article, Eaton parodies the contention that professional actors appear in films by distinguishing between two horses on a movie set. The horse that had cooperated with the director was apparently a professional actor while the more recalcitrant one was "merely an amateur."¹⁷

The tentative, contradictory treatment that film acting received in much of this early writing was prompted by the disjunction between the aesthetic pretensions of the discourse on acting and the types of films being produced at the time. It should be clear that the discourse on acting did not emerge simply because people acted in films. There was obviously some uncertainty about *what* people did in moving pictures. The discourse on acting worked against rather contradictory evidence to assert and establish the "fact" that people acted in films. It therefore had an active role in the changes taking place in the production and reception of moving pictures; it was not merely an effect or a reflection of those changes.

In fact, it was not until well after the discourse on acting emerged that films began to appear that fully supported and gave credence to the claim that people acted in films. The most famous and influential of these films were the French Films D'Art distributed by the Pathé Company. The films were offered by reviewers as proof that the art of acting could be translated to the screen:

The greatest improvement at present (and there is still plenty of room for more) is along the line of dramatic structure and significant acting. Does it sound silly to talk thus pedantically, in the language of dramatic criticism, about moving pictures? If you will watch a poor American picture unroll blinkingly, and then a good French one, you will feel that it is not silly after all.

With reference to the Pathé Film D'Art, "The Return of Ulysses," to which I referred last week, it is interesting to point out that the story was written by Jules Lemaitre, of the Academie Francaise, and the principal characters are taken by Mme. Bartet, MM. Albert Lambert, Lelauny and

Paul Mounet, all of the Comedie Francaise, Paris. This is equivalent to David Belasco and his Stuyvesant company doing the work for the Edison Company. Again I say, American Manufacturers please note!¹⁸

The artistic pretensions of the discourse on acting were clearly borne out by these films. The Films D'Art were a series of films produced in a Neuilly studio by a production group of the same name and controlled and distributed by Pathé. Although the group began making films in 1908 their early efforts were not released in the United States until 1909. A certain amount of American publicity accompanied their production, however, and therefore preceded their release here. A French correspondent for *Variety*, reporting in July 1908, announced that some of France's greatest playwrights were "writing versions of the best works for famous actors to play – before the camera." As an example he noted that Huguenot, "the latest member of our great national stage," was appearing before the camera in *Blanchette* under the direction of Germier. Elsewhere it was rumored that Bernhardt, Duse, and "other great actresses of the day" were performing their greatest theatrical successes on film for Pathé.¹⁹

The first Film D'Art released in America, in February 1909, was entitled *Incriminating Evidence*. The *New York Dramatic Mirror* reacted to it this way: "It promises to be the most important dramatic subject ever issued by any company. It is acted by Severin, the great French pantomimist, who has proven one of the vaudeville sensations of the year in America. He is assisted in the film by his own company." The second American release (which had actually been the first produced) was *The Assassination of the Duke de Guise*. The names of the famous actors who appeared in the films were given a great deal of prominence in reviews and publicity, as they had been for the Severin picture: "The story was written for Pathe Freres by M. Henri Levedan of the Academie Francaise, and the chief parts were played by Mlle. Robinne and Mssrs. Lebargy and Albert Lambert of the Comedie Francaise." The *Dramatic Mirror* immediately hailed the film as "one of the few masterpieces of motion picture production."²⁰

The Film D'Art series continued, apparently in monthly releases, with such films as *The Tower of Nesle* from the novel by Dumas (September 1909), *Drink* from *L'Assomoir* by Zola (October 1909), *Rigoletto* from Verdi's opera (November 1909), and *La Grande Breteche* from the novel by Balzac (December 1909).²¹ The publicity surrounding the first three of these films did not call any special attention to specific actors. It made more general claims about the artfulness of these films. For instance, we are told that *The Tower of Nesle* is "enacted by the leading exponents of dramatic art," and that *Drink* is the "greatest picture ever produced." The ads that appeared for *La Grande Breteche* made similar claims, but they also stressed the cast – Phillippe Garnier of the Comédie Française, André Calamettes of the Gymanase, and Mlle. Sergine of L'Odéon.²²

It should be noted that Pathé released other prestige pictures during this time which were not technically part of the Film D'Art series. *Her Dramatic Career*, for instance, received the same kind of publicity as *La Grande Breteche*, a month before the latter's release. And one reviewer judged an earlier effort, *The Hand* (from February of 1909), to be in the same class as the initial Films D'Art.²³ The Films D'Art were the most visible examples of a more general interest Pathé had in "high-class" productions.

Early Film D'Art releases of 1910 presented Mlle. Victoria Lepanto in *Carmen* and *The Lady with the Camelias*. Although Lepanto received more publicity than any actor

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who had previously appeared in Films D'Art, nothing was said to imply that she had a theatrical background. This marks a significant departure from earlier practice and takes us into the province of the picture personality. The Film D'Art's supreme contribution to the contention that people acted in films probably did not come until 1912 with the release of a filmed version of *Camille* starring Sarah Bernhardt. Bernhardt's entry into moving pictures had been long awaited. Her capitulation was seen as "a milestone in the evolution of the moving picture."²⁴ The world's greatest and most famous actress (by many accounts at least) had become a photoplayer, thus blurring – for an instant at least – all distinctions between the moving picture and the legitimate theater.

Camille was not different from the initial efforts of the Film D'Art in kind so much as degree. Bernhardt's name was a household word while those of Robinne and Lechary were not. "Bernhardt" had attained the status of a popular symbol, the name itself signifying the art of great acting. The producers certainly took this into account when they paid Bernhardt a reported \$30,000 to appear before the camera. The promoters of *Camille* (as well as those who promoted *Queen Elizabeth*, Bernhardt's next film) capitalized on it with an intensive publicity campaign, and the many journalists who had an interest in advancing the aesthetic legitimacy of the cinema used it to make some of their most zealous claims. *Camille* apparently succeeded. According to the publicity for the film and an attendant article in *Moving Picture News* the film was the "fastest seller ever offered States Rights buyers."²⁵

The theatrical model, which had been taken up somewhat awkwardly by the discourse on acting in discussions of other films, was fully embodied by the Film D'Art. The comparisons between the theater and moving pictures were quite appropriate here. The Films D'Art, after all, were moving pictures of theatrical plays. Because of this, it probably seemed natural (as well as expedient) to emphasize the performance of the actors involved and publicize their names. Plays were promoted and consumed in this way. The enunciative position that the theatrical actor assumed in the theater was reproduced in these films. The notion of the film actor emerged through its association with this established tradition.

The Films D'Art have a prominent place in this history not because they were the first films of their kind (though this is arguable), but because they were the most visible, the most regularly released, and the most influential. Writers quite commonly held the films up to the public and to the American producers as the foremost examples of film art. For many they represented the future of the moving picture industry – that ideal point at which the theater and the cinema would seamlessly merge to elevate the tastes of the masses to an appreciation of theatrical art. This future was not realized of course; the cinema would not become "filmed theater." Nevertheless, the Film D'Art had a significant impact on the course the cinema took during these years.

Developments in American production paralleled the "advances" of the Film D'Art. Manufacturers began to release prestige pictures – adaptations of famous literary and dramatic works – as early as 1907. Kalem released a version of *Ben Hur* in late 1907 that later became famous in connection with a copyright decision regarding adaptations. By March of 1908 Selig had produced versions of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Rip Van Winkle*, and Vitagraph released *The Story of Treasure Island* and *Francesca da Rimini*. Vitagraph, in fact, was the company that most vigorously

pursued a policy of producing "artful" adaptations on a regular basis. At least five adaptations of plays by Shakespeare were produced by Vitagraph in 1908.²⁶ The manufacturers in presenting these adaptations attempted to both exploit the already constituted fame of these titles and establish the aesthetic legitimacy of moving pictures. The films worked toward this latter end by taking up a theatrical model and giving support to the discourse on acting. One does not, after all, "pose" the role of Macbeth. The very existence of some of these films gave credence to the contention that people acted in films.

Reviews of these films often noted the acting and discussed its quality. "The leading role and character part executed by the man who plays the double life of Dr. Jekyll – at times Mr. Hyde – is so convincing that no greater display of ability to fulfill this role could be shown by any actor. . . . Throughout the performance the scenes are as realistic as in any theater." "The acting of the principal characters in Richard III is all that can be desired, the only blemish being in the battle where the smiles on the faces of the actors are ill-timed."²⁷ One expects such references to acting in reviews today, but they were exceptional at the time.

Vitagraph's activities in prestige production accelerated in 1909. In February, a version of *Virginius* appeared that was "said to be" (by the promoters no doubt) "another step higher in the excellent work of the Vitagraph players." Ads for the film stressed that it was "elaborately staged, gorgeously costumed, superbly acted." This became the slogan for Vitagraph's prestige pictures, which soon appeared under the designation "High Art" films. Another name, *Film de Luxe*, was given to a number of films (among them a series of five films derived from Hugo's *Les Misérables*).²⁸ These designations clearly associated Vitagraph's quality productions with the type of film bearing the name *Film D'Art*.

There was, however, at least one significant difference between a Film D'Art such as *Incriminating Evidence* (released in February 1909) and the Vitagraph films (such as *Virginius*) released around the same time. The latter did not exploit the names of actors. We do not see an effort on the part of American producers to adopt this strategy until the middle of 1909. Vitagraph's move in this direction came in May, with a High Art production of *Oliver Twist*. An ad in the *New York Dramatic Mirror* announced that Miss Elita Proctor Otis appeared in the film "as Nancy Sykes, the role which this eminent actress has made famous throughout the world."²⁹ The ad displayed Otis's name prominently, in bold-face type the same size as that used for the title.

This did not, by any means, become standard practice for Vitagraph. In fact, most of the High Art films that followed *Oliver Twist* were not marketed in this way (though there was a continued emphasis on the superb acting in the films). One can argue that this was because truly famous actors were not appearing in the films. Yet the company claimed that they were, and – without naming names – they continued to use this as a selling point:

Several notable productions of the Shakespeare drama have been made by the Vitagraph and these have excited unstinted praise from the dramatic commentators, but *The Twelfth Night* is to be the best of all and the most elaborate preparations are being made . . . A Shakespearean player of country-wide fame is one of the Vitagraph producers, and he has been

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given absolutely a free hand in the selection of special players. If the Vitagraph could announce the cast of characters on the sheet you would be astonished at the display of familiar names.⁴⁰

Although the Edison Company had produced adaptations previously (a 1903 version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for instance) they do not seem to have had a strong role in the high-class-film movement until the latter half of 1909, when they produced a version of *The Prince and the Pauper* with Miss Cecil Spooner:

Miss Cecil Spooner was especially employed to enact the difficult role of Tom Canty, the pauper boy, and Edward, the boy prince of Wales in Mark Twain's celebrated story, *The Prince and the Pauper*. Graceful, effective and polished as an actress, her finished art has contributed much to the beauty and strength of this notable silent drama.

We hope to employ others as well-known [as Spooner] in the near future and meantime we are building up our own force with care and discrimination.

We intend from time to time (as we have in the past) to put out especially high class pictures, based on familiar themes or plots of well-known playwrights and literary producers, with actors of known reputation. And these special pictures, sold as they will be at the same price will, we believe, commend themselves strongly to the trade as an indication of what the Edison Company is willing to do to advance the interests of the business.⁴¹

The earlier high class films mentioned here may have been produced, but they were not accompanied by a comparable amount of publicity. And they certainly were not part of a regular policy of manufacturing and promoting films with well-known actors.

In September 1909, *Moving Picture World* published a cast list of the Edison film *Ethel's Luncheon*. None of the cast members were famous. The list itself served to stress the "fact" that the film contained actors, and that it should be received much as a play would be received. But the Edison Company's great coup was the engagement of the French pantomimist Pilar Morin in September of 1909. Pilar Morin was known in America, having toured successfully as a special attraction in Vaudeville. Her first film with the Edison Company was *Comedy and Tragedy*. An article in the *Edison Kinetogram* (later reproduced in *Moving Picture World*) authored by Pilar Morin and entitled "The Value of Silent Drama; or Pantomime in Acting" accompanied its release.⁴² In it, Pilar-Morin argues that the art of pantomime is at the base of all great drama, thus effacing the differences not only between pantomime and legitimate theater, but also between pantomime (itself a respected cultural form) and moving pictures. She ends by praising the great advances of the Edison Company in "elevating the art of moving pictures" and in "securing well known artists and actors."

There is every reason to believe that Cecil Spooner and Elita Proctor Otis's appearances in film were, at the time, designed as one-shot ventures. Edison obviously engaged Pilar Morin on a more long-term basis. Although she only appeared in special releases, she became in effect the star member of the Edison stock company. After *Comedy and Tragedy* she appeared in at least six other films: *The Japanese Peach Boy*,

Carmen, The Cigarette Maker of Seville, The Piece of Lace, From Tyranny to Liberty, and The Key of Life.

These films were released at the time picture personalities were beginning to achieve fame for their work in moving pictures. Pilar-Morin has a transitional and somewhat ambiguous status in this history. On the one hand she clearly fits into the tradition of Severin and Proctor – actors whose appearance in moving pictures traded upon their fame as actors outside of moving pictures. It is in this sense that she was such a central figure in articulating the discourse on acting. However, on the other hand, she was promoted through an intense publicity campaign that not only pointed to the fact that an accomplished actor was appearing in films, but also attempted to establish her identity across a number of films as something that was marketable. She became a personality:

Mlle. Pilar-Morin has come at the psychological moment, or, it may also be put, she is a happy accident – very gifted, very optimistic and very earnest. Curiosity as to the personalities of leading artists connected with the opera and the stage is becoming duplicated in the moving picture field, where, in the last few months, the renowned and the favorite performers have become familiar to the 7,000,000 public of the United States. The most renowned of them all, who easily takes pride of place in virtue of her record and her transcendental ability is Mme. Pilar-Morin.³³

Later in this article Pilar-Morin's notion that the silent drama is "the expression of one's personality in one's acting" is voiced. As we shall see in the next chapter it is this notion that characterized the kind of knowledge that emerged to create the picture personality. It can be argued, in fact, that throughout 1910 Pilar-Morin functioned for the Edison Company in much the same way (though probably not as successfully) as Florence Lawrence and Florence Turner did for Imp and Vitagraph. The notable difference is that Lawrence and Turner never had any previous fame as actors outside of moving pictures.

The Biograph Company's activities during this time should be noted. Biograph did produce a number of theatrical and literary adaptations between 1907 and 1910.³⁴ It did not, however, publicize the names of its actors, whether famous or not. In this respect, it can be said that Biograph refrained from participating fully in the strategy pursued by Vitagraph and Edison. Yet the Biograph films did strongly emphasize acting and did therefore support the discourse on acting, even if it did so with somewhat less fanfare. A review of *The Better Way* in August 1909 stated that the film's "good acting is the point."³⁵ And, as we shall see in a moment, *The Better Way* was later held up as an example of a film with pure acting. Even as early as May 1909 the *New York Dramatic Mirror* could claim:

The progress that is being made by American film manufacturers along the lines of higher dramatic art in picture pantomime is probably best illustrated by the results that have been accomplished by the Biograph Company. It is no reflection on the other American manufacturers and the great improvement they are all making to assert that the Biograph Company at present is producing a better general average of dramatic pantomime than

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any other company in America. If we except Pathe Freres, this claim for the Biograph may be extended to include the world.³⁶

The rising emphasis on a theatrical model of "fine acting" during this period culminated in the formation of the Famous Players Film Company in 1912. Adolph Zukor set up the company specifically with the intent of presenting great theatrical actors in prestigious roles. The company would be more exclusively identified with this kind of prestige production than the other American companies, which only produced them intermittently. Zukor entered into an agreement with Daniel Frohman, a respected manager of theatrical actors, and Charles Frohman, a powerful producer on Broadway, to assure a steady stream of talent and material and, no doubt, to give his venture the stamp of respectability. Although Mary Pickford soon became Famous Players's biggest star (of course by this time she could be billed as a great actress, having conquered Broadway), and the company's reliance on the theater eventually weakened, during its early years it presented such renowned legitimate actors as Sarah Bernhardt, Mrs. Fiske, Jack Barrymore, and James K. Hackett.³⁷ These efforts further supported the idea that actors appeared in films and in fact exploited the public's desire to see identifiable figures acting on the screen.

As noted earlier, though, this desire was not a natural one; it had a specific history and had in fact been solicited in the years following 1907. Previous histories of the star system have largely ignored the appearance and elaboration of the discourse on acting. This chapter has traced the early history of this discourse and argued that it was through this discourse that the idea of the film actor was constituted. Around 1907 attention began to be focused away from the projectionist and the mechanical capabilities of the apparatus and toward the human labor involved in the production of film. Specifically, attention was turned to those who appeared in films, and their activity began to be characterized, after a theatrical model, as acting. In effect, a system of enunciation was put in place that featured the actor as subject. This institutionalized a mode of reception in which the spectator regarded the actor as the primary source of aesthetic effect. It is the identity of the actor as subject that would be elaborated as the star system developed.

It is clear that the symbolic work that established the actor as subject is closely linked to a specific economic strategy. The status of film as enunciation clearly changed through the discourse on acting; but it can also be said that the actor changed the status of film as commodity. The discourse on acting emerged at a time of a rapid expansion of the film industry. Companies were faced with the need to rationalize production and produce a larger and more predictable supply of films. The move toward fictional production and the formation of stock companies can be seen as a response to this need. The companies were faced with another problem within this environment—how to differentiate any of their films from the hundreds of other films on the market. Their company name and the genre of the particular film accomplished this to a degree, but not to the degree or with the force that the presence of an actor would. Films with actors could be differentiated from films without actors, and, as the presence of actors became accepted as the norm, particular actors (their identities) could be differentiated from other actors. Product differentiation quite typically follows a semiotic scheme in which differences in meaning become differences in value in an economic exchange. The discourse on acting began to put in place a system

of product differentiation that would be based on the identity of the subject within an institutionalized system of enunciation.

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Notes

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- 1 See Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880–1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), and David Carroll, *The Matinee Idols* (London: Peter Owen, 1972).
- 2 See Robert C. Allen, *Vaudeville and Film 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction* (New York: Arno Press, 1980). My discussion of the industry prior to 1907 owes a great deal to Allen's analysis. 27
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 128. 28
- 4 Eric Smoodin, "Attitudes of the American Printed Medium toward the Cinema: 1894–1908," unpublished paper, University of California, Los Angeles, 1979. 29
- 5 Allen, p. 105. 30
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 213; Charles Musser, "Another Look at the 'Chaser Theory,'" *Studies in Visual Communication* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 24–44. 31
- 7 Charles Musser, "The Nickelodeon Era Begins: Establishing the Framework for Hollywood's Mode of Representation," *Framework* 22–23 (Autumn 1983): 4; David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); On Griffith and Biograph see Tom Gunning's important work, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). 32
- 8 See Allen, *Vaudeville and Film 1895–1915*, pp. 192–260. 33
- 9 "How the Cinematographer Works and Some of His Difficulties," *Moving Picture World*, May 18, 1907, p. 165. 34
- 10 *Ibid.*, June 8, 1907, p. 212. 35
- 11 The events and actions that appear on screen are, in terms of this distinction, filmic. The profilmic designates the existence of those events (whether staged or unstaged) in real time and space before the camera. See Etienne Souriau, *L'univers filmique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1953). 36
- 12 "How the Cinematographer Works," *Moving Picture World*, May 18, 1907, p. 166. 37
- 13 *Ibid.*, June 8, 1907, p. 21.
- 14 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 10–15.
- 15 *Moving Picture World*, Oct. 21, 1907, p. 453.
- 16 *Ibid.*, Aug. 29, 1908, p. 94.
- 17 Walter Prichard Eaton, "The Canned Drama," *American Magazine* 68 (Sept. 1909), pp. 493–500.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 499; *Moving Picture World*, Mar. 20, 1909, p. 326.
- 19 *Variety*, July 7, 1908, p. 11; *Moving Picture World*, Sept. 5, 1908, p. 177.
- 20 *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Feb. 27, 1909, pp. 18, 13.
- 21 *Moving Picture World*, Sept. 25, 1909, p. 426; Oct. 23, 1909, p. 557; Nov. 13, 1909, p. 671; Dec. 4, 1909, p. 789.
- 22 *Ibid.*, Oct. 23, 1909, p. 557; Dec. 4, 1909, p. 789.
- 23 *Ibid.*, Nov. 13, 1909, p. 671; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Feb. 27, 1909, p. 13.

- 11 *Moving Picture World*, Feb. 26, 1910, p. 294; Feb. 17, 1912, p. 596; see also *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 1911, p. 9.
- 12 The figure of \$30,000 was of course part of the publicity and, as with all such figures, must be taken with a degree of suspicion; *Moving Picture News*, Mar. 16, 1912, p. 1089; see also *Moving Picture World*, Mar. 9, 1912, p. 874.
- 13 *Moving Picture World*, Feb. 1, 1908, p. 70; Mar. 7, 1908, p. 194; May 2, 1908, p. 406; Mar. 7, 1908, p. 195; Feb. 8, 1908, p. 103; Apr. 25, 1908, p. 374; Oct. 3, 1908, p. 25; Jan. 2, 1909, p. 21. For a broader account of the issues raised by the Vitagraph "quality" films, see Roberta Pearson and William Uricchio's forthcoming book, *Invisible Viewers, Inaudible Voices: Intertextuality and Reception in the Early Cinema* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press).
- 14 *Moving Picture World*, Mar. 7, 1908, p. 194; Oct. 3, 1908, p. 253.
- 15 *New York Dramatic Mirror*, Feb. 6, 1909, p. 19, 18; see, for instance, *Moving Picture World*, June 19, 1909, p. 862, and July 17, 1909, p. 79; Aug. 7, 1909, p. 184.
- 16 *New York Dramatic Mirror*, May 1, 1909, p. 43.
- 17 *Moving Picture World*, Aug. 14, 1909, p. 64.
- 18 *The Edison Kinetogram*, Aug. 1, 1909, p. 14, and *Moving Picture World*, Aug. 28, 1909, p. 277.
- 19 *The Edison Kinetogram*, Sept. 15, 1909, p. 3; Nov. 15, 1909, pp. 12-13; *Moving Picture World*, Nov. 13, 1909, p. 682.
- 20 *Moving Picture World*, Jan. 22, 1910, p. 204.
- 21 See Tom Gunning, "D. W. Griffith and the Narrator-System: Narrative Structure and Industry Organization in Biograph Films, 1908-1909" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1986), pp. 342-50.
- 22 *Moving Picture World*, Aug. 21, 1909, p. 253.
- 23 *New York Dramatic Mirror*, May 1, 1909, p. 34.
- 24 *Moving Picture World*, Jan. 11, 1913, p. 123; Aug. 23, 1913, pp. 854-55; July 11, 1914, p. 186; *Moving Picture News*, Aug. 2, 1913, p. 12; Jan. 17, 1914, p. 34.