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scratch in/cast out

4

write \rit - id +V\vb wrote \rot <i>usu</i> - od +V\	to place on the market characters or inscriptions		a message to undergo utterance, to become spoken
the author of fate engaged according to precepts	Goth <i>writ</i> stroke, letter Gk <i>Rhine</i> file, rasp	reveal, describe treat of or depict with	
something unknown, secret or hidden		akin to OS tear, wound	basic meaning ordination
ME fr OE <i>uterra</i> meaning outer	style call sign or exhibit situated on the outside or extreme limit:	specifically to circulate statement or sound	composed by machine specific script language or form
make necessary	: <i>also</i> to permit or be adapted	creases written by manifest	fr OE <i>utor</i> , compare to <i>ut</i> , out
fr OE <i>writan</i> to scratch, draw, engrave	the point of strangeness : UNUSUAL	burst out with a series of characters	

as if by incising scratching or especially	<i>vrhati</i> , he wounds tears plucks	in order to record relate or explain	utterance to legible characters
upon music	send in a letter forged or counterfeit	also dial writ or dial wrote	forth in or form by or as if by scoring or incising a surface
ME <i>writen</i> , remote and often most remote from the center	send forth as regularly preoccupied	ON, <i>rita</i> on parchment, offered up for sale or barter:	Skt, <i>vrana</i> wound, tear
combination of legibles, marked indelibly		dispose of out in the audible	the introduction or removal in of or by means of a medium
make a permanent impression of	pour, thrust or shoot out speech especially on paper	bring, force, effect or cause	
letters, words or sentences	as notes or currency		utter\uder adj vb -ED/ING

John Pruitt

disembodiment & the cinematic era

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Sometime in the winter of 1976 I was walking along 5th Avenue in Manhattan near the New York Public Library when I came upon a spectacle, one which was undoubtedly not an unfamiliar sight for long-time residents in New York City, but for me was at that time wholly novel. It was a row of trailers and freight trucks, lights, scaffolding, cordoned off sections of sidewalk, an assemblage of busy young men and women, each with his or her own walkie-talkie. A movie was being made. After a couple of inquiries with the crowd of onlookers, I found out that the work in question was *Exorcist II* and that Richard Burton was on set for this particular shot. I couldn't help but watch. As I waited a rather long time for something of interest to happen - for anything to happen - I took in the entire proceedings and was impressed by the elaborate set-up needed for what looked like a typical street scene: extras playing pedestrians, all kinds of reflectors and lights, electrical cables strewn everywhere, a seemingly endless number of crew members. As it turned out, I did get to see a take. Burton eventually emerged out of his trailer, with overcoat and briefcase, to wait a few seconds for a bus. The bus came, he got on, and then it took off with him seated by the window - presumably so that the camera could get one last glimpse as he traveled out of frame. That was it; end of set-up. The sense of anti-climax couldn't have been more vivid.

What really struck home for me at the time (and I have never forgotten the lesson) was my awareness of the enormous amount of time, money and talent expended in such a production to achieve very little - even if on Hollywood's own terms the final result was to be counted a success. As far as I could tell, Burton's boarding of a bus, with the elaborate choreography and technical super-structure which surrounded it, was nothing more than a shot to establish narrative continuity. How does the main character get from one place to another? Burton's salary was such that if we are to see him board a bus, we'd better see him seated in a window seat facing the camera or the producer's money would presumably be wasted. And even if more

might have been involved in the scene, most of that superstructure was there simply to make sure that the backdrop of New York City was to be perceived as simply that: New York City. In short, high production values

are largely devoted to ensuring that the space of a film's narrative is an "embodied" space. Utterly fantastic things may happen in it - the devil exorcised, for instance, or cops in cars giving a gravity-defying chase to robbers

at phenomenally high speeds – yet that space must come across as palpable and real (this is the point) – at all costs.

Arguably, there is nothing wrong with this priority, which nevertheless burdens commercial filmmaking with an enormously inefficient means to a very simple end – so inefficient in fact that behind any mainstream film lies a desperate effort, one which can take years, just to get someone to even consider the significant financial risk of making a film in the first place. One trade-off is popularity. Let go of that "embodied" illusionist space and you risk losing your potentially world-wide audience. A fair enough argument – but there are those who defend such practices in stronger terms, that is to say, defend it as cinema's natural propensity towards populist narrative. But watch the actual process in action and you notice there is nothing "natural" about it.

To throw the theme of film and disembodiment into greater relief, it is useful to return to speculation on the medium when it was still relatively new and when, in fact, it was theater art in all its many guises – either as stage plays, musical performance, vaudeville skits, circus stunts – that was the overwhelmingly popular cultural form. First film, and then television have so effectively quashed the centrality of theater, that we find it hardly feasible that at one time, countless troupes of performers moved across the continent, from town to town, to the remotest of places, putting on relatively inexpensive and largely utterly routine "bread and butter" performances year round.

An early argument against cinema as being a worthy art was that the camera rendered space in such true-to-life terms that the medium could only be a passive transmission system for older art forms. Film could illustrate novels or faithfully record stage plays. That was it. As a performance art, the theater was considered the cinema's closest relative and the comparison left cinema coming up short. For the space of cinema, with its camera out in the palpable world, was considered too "actual" for creative expression. To its great honor, the space of theater, on the other hand, was wholly artificial and convention bound – a stylized realm in which genuine formal expression was possible. Among others, the brilliant Harvard psychologist Hugo Munsterberg turned these harsh conclusions literally upside-down when he published The Photoplay: A Psychological Study in 1916. By shifting the terms a little, he insisted that it was in fact the theater which was phenomenologically real – obeying the laws of unified time and space precisely because flesh and blood actors were on stage moving through a space contiguous to and no less real than that which the spectators themselves inhabited at precisely the same time. It was cinema that was "unreal" – a flickering two-dimensional shadow play. Through editing, film cut across space in a manner having more to do with mental activity, with leaps of thought (as it were) than it did with one's experience of the here and now, a continuum through which we must laboriously move by ambulating our own body. Rather, cinematic space was perform a disembodied space to the extent that

even a film shot with the most slavish regard for spatial continuity only disguised an unavoidable discontinuity. For instance – a shot of a man's back walking out a door is "match cut" with a subsequent "reverse angle" shot of him as he emerges onto a front porch. Continuity? When has anyone seen such a thing in real life? We don't instantaneously project ourselves through walls into another space to follow a course of events. As with guests at one of our own dinner parties, so with actors on the theater stage: when they go out the door – they're gone from our direct observation if not from our consciousness.

At almost the same time that Munsterberg was meditating on film and theater and helping to correct hasty assumptions, Luigi Pirandello, then a burgeoning playwright who wrote film scenarios as a way of paying the bills, published a novel, Shoot!: The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator, which was also a meditation on theater and cinema. Like Munsterberg, Pirandello considered cinematic time and space to be primarily disembodied in a manner which was virtually literal since he found the core of his melancholy sympathy with the film performers themselves. Film, Pirandello thought, robbed an actor of his greatest asset, his flesh and blood presence in front of a live audience, where he could be fueled by the spontaneous appreciation of his gifts as he demonstrated control of body and voice to mesmerize and carry his spectators away. In the cinema, and especially the silent cinema, the actor played only to the camera and gave up his body's integrity to a photographic machine and an editor who manipulated its visual product at will. The performer's body on screen might be rendered as only a face, or feet, or hands – or made "invisible" altogether if another actor in the same scene was on camera and he off. Here is part of Pirandello's prescient theoretical observation (translated, incidentally, by C. K. Scott-Moncrieff), spoken through the mask of his central character, Serafino Gubbio, a camera operator. Serious actors are...

in exile, not only from the stage, but also in a sense from themselves. Because their action, the live action of their live bodies, there, on the screen of the cinematograph, no longer exists: it is their image alone, caught in a moment, in a gesture, an expression, that flickers and disappears. They are confusedly aware, with a maddening, indefinable sense of emptiness, that their bodies are so to speak subtracted, suppressed, deprived of their reality, of breath, of voice, of the sound that they make in moving about, to become only a dumb image which quivers for a moment on the screen and disappears, in silence, in an instant, like an unsubstantial phantom, the play of illusion upon a dingy sheet of cloth.¹

Eighty-five years later, Pirandello's philosophical novel is still one of the best writings on cinema. One wonders if his spectral view of individual identity,

as it developed in his mature plays, was not in some way crucially influenced by his thinking about the new medium. Today, perhaps the insight seems obvious to us, ourselves long divorced from theatrical culture, which in its popular manifestation at least, has been "cinematized" beyond recognition. But for those who experienced the transition, the supplanting of theater by cinema remained haunting. At the end of his directing career, Charles Chaplin returned to the theme of his early theatrical life in *Limelight* (1950). In it, he plays Calvero, a music hall performer and Chaplin's symbolic alter-ego who wakes from a dream in which he is performing in front of an entirely empty house. The incident gains resonance, clearly emphasized by Chaplin's nostalgic retreat to pre-cinema days in the film's setting, with the recognition that what is perhaps a recurring nightmare for any stage performer was the day-to-day reality of a film star who had been nurtured in a world where theater had once reigned supreme.

In comparatively recent times, not everyone is so inured to the ubiquitous presence of the movies, that the fundamental price they exact is forgotten. In his moral diatribe against the classic Hollywood cinema, the book-length essay, *The Devil Finds Work*, published in 1986, James Baldwin recalls being taken as an early teen to his first stage play, Orson Welles' Harlem production of *Macbeth* in which the action had been transplanted from Scotland to Haiti. With uncanny echoes of Pirandello, the dreamy movie addict had a rude awakening. The apparent strangeness of fellow African-Americans speaking Shakespearean English was wholly satisfying and reaffirmed his own identity in a way which the cinema couldn't have done, whether it allowed black performers to star or not: "The distance between oneself – the audience – and a screen performer is an absolute, masquerading as intimacy."² By contrast, though his Harlem neighbors were speaking lines meant for Scottish nobles, there was something of their own live integrity in the here and now which could not be erased and which wrestled productively with the Shakespearean material and with the young Baldwin's self-image:

For the tension in the theater is a very different, and very particular tension: this tension between the real and the imagined is the theater, and this is why the theater will always remain a necessity. One is not in the presence of shadows, but responding to one's flesh and blood: in the theater, we are recreating each other.³

For Baldwin, cinema allows the spectator to imagine the other on the screen far too readily, in a daydream state with no challenge to his or her most self-deceiving, escapist fantasies. In short, some seventy years later, he compounded Pirandello's dour observations on cinema; for, in Baldwin's formulation, not only the film actor, but the typical film spectator, too, is alienated from himself – although he doesn't know it. Unless, as with Baldwin, he