



# NOTEBOOK

Cate Blanchett impersonating Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There*  
(Todd Haynes, 2007) / Courtesy of Savor Ediciones

## Faces, Voices, Bodies, Gestures

The Conception of Acting as  
the Core of Film Analysis

# IMITATION, ECCENTRICITY, AND IMPERSONATION IN MOVIE ACTING

From the eighteenth until the early twentieth centuries the Aristotelian concept of mimesis governed most aesthetic theory, and stage acting was often described as an “imitative art”. Denis Diderot’s *Paradox sur le comédien* (1758), for example, argued that the best theatre actors played not from personal emotions or “sensibility”, but from “imitation” (COLE and CHINOY, 1970: 162). According to Diderot, actors who depended too much upon their emotions were prone to lose control, couldn’t summon the same feelings repeatedly, and were likely to alternate between sublime and flat performances in the same play; properly imitative actors, on the other hand, were rational observers of both human nature and social conventions who developed imaginary models of dramatic characters and,

by imitating those models, reproduced the same nuances of behavior and colors of emotion every evening.

For centuries actors on the stage were taught to imitate a vocabulary of gestures and poses, and certain variations on the theory of acting as imitation persisted into modern times, as in the essays on aesthetics in the 1880 and 1911 editions of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, which try to distinguish between the mimetic arts and the “symbolic” or abstract arts; in both editions, acting is described as an “imitative art” dependent upon and subordinate to the higher art of poetry. At a still later date, Brecht went so far as to argue that not only fictional characters but also everyday personalities and emotions are developed through a process of imitation: “The human being copies gesture,

miming, tones of voice. And weeping arises from sorrow, but sorrow also arises from weeping" (1964: 152). For the past seventy or eighty years, however, the dominant forms of actor training in the United States have minimized or even denied the importance of imitation and the related arts of mimicry, mime, and impersonation. "The actor does not need to imitate a human being," Lee Strasberg famously declared. "The actor is himself a human being and can create out of himself" (COLE and CHINOY, 1970: 623). More recently, the website of a San Francisco acting school specializing in the "Sandford Meisner Technique" (named for a legendary New York teacher of stage and screen performers) announces that its students will be taught to "live truthfully under imaginary circumstances" and to "express oneself while 'playing' imaginary circumstances" ([www.themeisnertechniquestudio.com](http://www.themeisnertechniquestudio.com)).

The change of emphasis from imitation to expression is due in part to motion pictures. Filmed performances are identical at every showing, making Diderot's paradox appear irrelevant, and movie close ups of actors reveal the subtlest emotions, giving weight to the idiosyncrasies of personal expression. But the shift toward personally expressive acting precedes the movies. The first manifestations of the change appear in the second half of the nineteenth century, with Henrik Ibsen's psychological dramas, William Archer's call for actors to "live the part," and Konstantin Stanislavsky's new style of introspective naturalism. By the late 1930s, when variants of Stanislavsky's ideas were fully absorbed into the US theatre and Hollywood achieved hegemony over the world's talking pictures, dramatic acting was

**In practice most modern actors are pragmatic rather than doctrinaire, willing to use whatever technique works or seems appropriate in particular circumstances. In fact, a great many films require a mixture of naturalistic and imitative techniques**

nearly always evaluated in terms of naturalness, sincerity, and emotional truth of expression. A kind of artistic revolution had occurred, which, in some of its manifestations, was akin to the victory of romanticism over classicism at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As M. H. Abrams (1971) explains in a famous study of that earlier revolution, the metaphor of art as a mirror reflecting the world was replaced by the metaphor of art as a lamp projecting individual emotions into the world. "Imitation" became associated with such words as "copy", "substitute", "fake", and even "counterfeit". (Notice also that in some contexts the related term "impersonation" now signifies an illegal act.) The new forms of psychological realism, on the other hand, were associated with such words as "genuine," "truthful", "organic", "authentic", and "real". Thus V. I. Pudovkin's early book on film acting championed Stanislavsky's idea that "an actor striving toward truth should be able to avoid the element of *portraying* his feelings to the audience" (1949: 334), and in the theatre the Actor's Studio advocated the development of "private moments" and "organic naturalness".

The romantic revolution was concurrent with the democratic and scientific revolutions that also changed

attitudes toward "innovation", a term which had been reviled in the writings of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and even Shakespeare, but which in the nineteenth century became a signifier of artistic achievement and "experimentation". As René Girard points out, however, where art is concerned innovation depends upon an imitative or mimetic relationship between new work and prior models: "The main prerequisite

for real innovation [in art] is a minimal respect for the past and a mastery of its achievements, that is, *mimesis*" (2008: 244). The postmodern spread of pastiche and quotation might be said to involve a turn to just this sort of mastery, but postmodernism relies upon a quality of irony or knowingness quite different from the classical arts.

The irony of the situation is that classicism and romanticism have always been two sides of the same coin. As Raymond Williams convincingly argues in *Culture and Society* (1950), the eighteenth-century doctrine of imitation was never intended as slavish adherence to a set of rules or to previous works of art; at its best, it was a set of precepts that were supposed to help artists achieve what Aristotle called "universals". But romanticism also claimed to be dealing with universals; the imitative tradition and the cult of personal expression were therefore equally idealistic and equally committed to a representation of what they regarded as essential reality. Where the history of acting is concerned, the major difference between these two schools is that the former claims to be Plato's "second nature" achieved by *mimesis*, and the latter claims to be original nature, achieved by playing "oneself".

Both approaches to performance are capable of producing good acting, and in practice most modern actors are pragmatic rather than doctrinaire, willing to use whatever technique works or seems appropriate in particular circumstances. In fact, a great many films require a mixture of naturalistic and imitative techniques. Consider Barbara Loden's raw, disturbing, utterly natural-looking performance in the title role of *Wanda* (1971), a film Loden also wrote and directed: she probably makes use of Method-style "sensory memory" to help create states of fatigue and hunger (as in the scene in which she sops up spaghetti sauce with bread and chews with gusto while also smoking a cigarette), but her performance also involves mimicry of a regional, working-class accent.

Although the technique of imitation and the technique of personal feeling are often opposed to one an-

other by theorists, they aren't mutually exclusive; it's quite possible for pantomime artists or actors who use conventional gestures to "live the part" and emotionally project "themselves" into their roles. A remarkable testimony to this phenomenon has been given to us by Martin LaSalle, the leading "model" in Robert Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959). LaSalle wasn't a professional actor when the picture was made and he found himself serving as a kind of puppet, executing whatever movements and poses Bresson asked of him. His performance is minimalist, seldom changing its expressive quality; at one point he sheds tears, but most of the time his off-screen narration, spoken quite calmly, serves to inform us of the intense emotions his character feels but doesn't obviously show on his face or in his voice. And yet LaSalle creates a memorably soulful effect, reminiscent in some ways of the

young Montgomery Clift. In 1990, when documentary filmmaker Babette Mangolte tracked LaSalle down in Mexico, where he has worked for many years as a film and theatre actor, he described how the experience of *Pickpocket* had marked his entire life. He recalled that Bresson told his "models" to repeat actions over and over, never explaining why; at one point he shot forty takes of LaSalle doing nothing more than walking up a stairway. The technique nevertheless had emotional consequences for the actor. LaSalle believed that Bresson was trying to provoke "an inner tension that would be seen in the hands and eyes", as if he wanted to "weaken the ego of the 'model'", thereby inducing "doubt", "anxiety", and "anguish tinged with pleasure". While the performance was achieved through a sort of pantomime or rote repetition of prescribed gestures and looks, it was by no means unfeeling.

Martin LaSalle performing his character in *Pickpocket* (Robert Bresson, 1959)



"I felt the tension of the pickpocket", LaSalle told Mangolte. "I think, even if we are only models, as [Bresson] says, we still take part in and internalize the activity. I felt as if I were living the situation, not externally but in a sensory way". The astonishing result was that after *Pickpocket* LaSalle moved to New York and studied for four years at The Actor's Studio with Lee Strasberg, who became the second great influence on his career.

As important as deeply felt emotion may be to a performer, there's something disingenuous about the modern pedagogical tendency to devalue imitation, for we can find many instances in which movie actors, even naturalistic ones, are required to perform imitative tasks: depending on the situation, they can be called upon to mimic accents and physical signifiers of age, social class, gender, and sexuality; to deliberately emphasize conventional poses and gestures; to "act" for other characters in visibly artificial ways; to imitate models of "themselves" by repeating personal eccentricities from role to role; and to impersonate historical figures or other actors.

We need only think of film comedy, which often involves foregrounding of stereotypical behavior and the mechanics of performance. Alec Guinness, a distinguished stage actor whose work in dramatic films depended upon minimalism and British reserve, was one of the most natural looking performers in screen history, and yet he performed in a manifestly "imitative" way when he

played comedy rather than drama. As George Smiley, the leading character in the British television adaptation of John Le Carré's *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy* (1989), Guinness is so quiet, so natural, so lacking in energetic movement and obvious emotion, that he makes the actors around him look like Dickensian caricatures; he reveals a repressed emotional intensity only when he makes slight adjustments of his eyeglasses and bowler hat. Contrast his performance in Alexander Mackendrick's dark comedy, *The Ladykillers* (1955): as the leader of a group of crooks who rent a room from a harmless little old lady, he wears comic buck teeth and sinister eye makeup, and his interactions with the landlady overflow with fake sincerity and oily sweetness. As Pudovkin might say, he *portrays* feelings, so that the audience, if not the naïve old lady, can see his absurdly unconvincing act.

The burlesque comic Ed Wynn once distinguished between joke-telling clowns and comic actors. The first type, Wynn explained, says and does funny things, and the second type says and does things *funnily*. The distinction doesn't quite hold because comic actors sometimes also say or do funny things; even so, light-comic genres often depend upon performers who can execute ordinary movements and expressions in amusing ways, as if "quoting" conventions. Ernst Lubitsch's Paramount musicals of the early 1930s are clear examples, requiring the actors to behave in a chic but visibly imitative style.

In *The Love Parade* (1930), which employs a good deal of silent pantomime, Maurice Chevalier is cast as a Parisian playboy and military attaché to the unmarried and sexually yearning Queen of Sylvania, played by Jeanette MacDonald. When the two characters meet, their comically stiff formality soon dissolves into flirtation and then into a duet entitled "Anything to Please the Queen". Throughout, their every intonation and expression is so heightened and intensified that there's barely any difference between talking and singing. In the slightly later *One Hour with You* (1932), everyone poses, speaks, sings and exchanges glances in this imitative fashion, heightened by moments of rhymed dialogue and direct address to the audience.

Lubitsch's non-musical comedy *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) might seem different because it's filled with Samson Raphaelson's witty dialogue, but it, too, involves imitation. In an opening scene, Herbert Marshall stands in the moonlight on the balcony of a hotel in Venice, looking down at the Grand Canal as an obsequious waiter hovers behind his shoulder and offers to serve him.

Amusing as the words are, the charm of the scene has as much to do with Marshall's performance, which epitomizes the popular 1930s idea of ultra-cosmopolitan masculinity. His well-cut tuxedo, his slicked-back hair, his elegant pose with one hand holding a cigarette and the other in a jacket pocket—all this creates an air of "sophisticated-ness" befitting

Herbert Marshall in *Trouble in Paradise* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1932)



an advertisement in a luxury magazine—. Marshall also speaks amusingly, in a plummy English accent, almost singing his lines in a tone of worldly, romantic melancholy. In keeping with the dialog, he's too good to be real. Indeed we soon learn that he's not a Baron but a jewel thief, perfectly suited to a film in which almost all the characters are pretending or wearing social masks.

An even more obvious form of imitation can be seen when actors play characters that try to hide their true feelings from one another or that put on a comic or ironic act—something that inevitably occurs in films that have theater or playacting as subject—.

*Being Julia* (István Szabó, 2004), for example, adapted from Somerset Maugham's novel *Theatre*, concerns an actor whose excess of real emotion threatens to undermine her performances. Annette Bening plays a middle-aged British stage star of the 1930s, a larger than life character endowed with innate theatricality and acute emotional sensitivity. The realistic performance requires Bening to imitate certain conventional models; she must adopt a British accent and her every gesture and expression, both on stage and off, must suggest the fragile histrionics of an aging diva.

The ensuing plot concerns her affair with an American fan barely older than her adolescent son who seduces her and then turns her into a miserable, sexually dependent slave. When the affair begins, she's lifted out of a mild depression and becomes giddy and girlish; but when her lover withdraws and treats her coldly, she becomes a haggard, weeping neurotic, alternately angry and groveling. What helps her conquer the roller-coaster of emotion is her memory of a long dead director and mentor (Michael Gambon), who magically appears as a sort of ghost in moments of crisis, criticizing her everyday performance and dispens-

**An even more obvious form of imitation can be seen when actors play characters that try to hide their true feelings from one another or that put on a comic or ironic act**

ing advice. Gambon is a projection of her own critical self-consciousness—an internal monitor or coach, created through her professional ability to mentally observe her performances as they happen, both on stage and in real life—. In Denis Diderot's words, Julia has within herself, like all the best actors, "an unmoved and disinterested onlooker" (COLE and CHINOY, 1970: 162). At her most anguished point, when she's weeping hysterically, Gambon appears and mocks her ability to "turn on the waterworks". He advises her to become a more imitative actor, exactly the sort of player Diderot might have admired: "You've got to learn to *seem* to do it—that's the art of acting!— Hold the mirror up to nature, ducky. Otherwise you become a nervous wreck". In the film's concluding moments, this advice enables her to emerge victorious not only in private life but also on the stage, where her lover's new girlfriend has been cast alongside her.

The stage acting in *Being Julia*, shown in close ups, is manifestly artificial and full of tricks: we see heavy makeup on the actors' faces, we hear the actors' loud voices projected toward the theatre auditorium, and we glimpse Bening struggling

with a misplaced prop during a tearful scene. In the off-stage sequences, however, the acting looks realistic and the emotions are sometimes expressed in nakedly exposed style. In the scene in which Bening has her tearful breakdown, she wears no apparent makeup and her pale skin becomes read and blotchy as she weeps. We can never know (without asking her) how this scene was achieved—she may have been feigning emotion, she may have been playing "herself" in imaginary circumstances, and she may have been doing both—. No matter how she accomplished her task, her performance looks spontaneous, as if she were *being* Julia rather than imitating her.

At the same time, the audience recognizes Julia as Annette Bening, whose body and expressive attributes can be seen in other films. Her apparent authenticity of feeling, which earned her an Academy-Award nomination for *Being Julia*, is essential to the cinema of sentiment or high emotion and is valued in all of today's popular genres; but the doubling or tandem effect of recognizing Bening alongside the character has a longer history, essential to the development of the star system. It first emerged in eighteenth-century theatre, at the time of Diderot, when leading actors such as David Garrick not only imitated Hamlet but also brought individual style or personality to the role. Thus, as time went on, it became possible to speak of "David Garrick's Hamlet", "John Barrymore's Hamlet", "John Gielgud's Hamlet", "Laurence Olivier's Hamlet", and even "Mel Gibson's Hamlet".

In motion pictures this phenomenon was intensified, with the result that stars often gained ascendancy over roles, repeatedly playing the same character types and bringing the same personal attributes and mannerisms to every appearance. Consider again Maurice Chevalier, who at Paramount in the 1930s was cast as a military officer, a medical

doctor, and a tailor, but who always played essentially the same character. Chevalier had been a hugely popular cabaret singer and star of the Folies Bergère in Paris during the 1920s, and Hollywood wanted him to display many of the performing traits associated with his success; at the same time, directors such as Lubitsch and Mamoulian modified those traits, making him less uninhibited and bawdy, more suitable to a general American audience. In his Paramount musicals of the pre-code era, he's always the boulevardier in a straw hat, the stereotypical representative of what American audiences at the time thought of as "gay Parée"—sophisticated, exuberant, grinning, amusingly adept at sexual innuendo, always ready to charm and seduce beautiful women—. Hence in *The Love Parade* and *One Hour with You*, the films I've described above, he not only imitates certain conventional gestures and expressions for the sake of comedy but also reproduces the broad smile, the jaunty posture, the suggestive leer, the rolling eyes, and the distinctive French accent that were associated with "Maurice Chevalier". His public personality was in a sense unique, but it was nonetheless a carefully crafted "model" in Diderot's sense of the term—a model so idiosyncratic that Chevalier became a popular subject for generations of comic impersonators to imitate on stage and in film—.

Chevalier's performances were stylized and extroverted, indebted to the musical revues of Paris, and for that reason he could be viewed as what the early futurists and the Soviet avant-garde called an "eccentric" actor; indeed Sergei Eisenstein's doctrine of "eccentrism", which is most clearly evident in the grotesque caricatures of *Strike* (Stachka, 1924), was developed in part by analogy with music-hall performers. Relatively few of the leading players in classic Hollywood had this extreme kind of eccentricity, although comics like the Marx

Brothers and W. C. Fields or unusual personalities like Wallace Beery, Marie Dressler and Mickey Rooney certainly qualify. Many character actors of the period were also eccentrics; indeed the very term "character actor", which in Shakespeare's day referred to a performer who played a single vivid type, was often used by the film industry to describe supporting players with cartoonish personalities: we need only think of the lively crowd of eccentrics in Preston Sturges's comedies—William Demarest, Eugene Pallette, Franklin Pangborn, Akim Tamiroff, Raymond Walburn, etc.—. Comedic females such as Marjorie Main and Thelma Ritter belong in the same category, as do many of the non-comic supporting players, such as Sydney Greenstreet, Elisha Cook, Jr. and Peter Lorre in John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).

Leading players, on the other hand, tended to have symmetrical faces and usually behaved in almost invisible fashion; their close-ups conveyed what Richard Dyer has called their "interiority", and the smallest movements of their bodies helped create a sense of their personalities. But the classic-era stars were no less carefully constructed performers than the character actors; their identities were created not only by their roles but also by their physical characteristics and idiosyncrasies or peculiarities of expression. Nearly all actors in the period played types and tended to be typecast, but they also brought unique qualities of "personality" or personal eccentricity to the types they played. In her intriguing essay on Humphrey Bogart, Louise Brooks makes precisely this point. "All actors know that truly natural acting is rejected by the audience", Brooks writes. "Though people are better equipped to judge acting than any other art, the hypocrisy of 'sincerity' prevents them from admitting that they, too, are always acting some role of their own invention. To be a successful actor, then, it is necessary

to add eccentricities and mystery to naturalness, so that the audience can admire and puzzle over something different than itself" (1983: 64-65).

Bogart was certainly a natural-looking performer who seemed to have a reflective, mysteriously experienced inner life, an actor who appeared to be *thinking* in a way quite different from Garbo's blank-faced close-up at the end of *Queen Christina* (Robert Mamoulian, 1933). But Bogart's "naturalness" was expressed through distinctive physical attributes and carefully crafted displays of personal eccentricities. To express thoughtfulness, for example, he often tugged at his earlobe, and to create an air of relaxed confidence or bravado he repeatedly hooked his thumbs into his pants waist. At one level Bogart was simply reacting as he naturally would; but the gestures were practiced and perfected until they became part of an expressive rhetoric, a repertory of performance signs. At the height of his fame he played many roles, among them a private eye, a gangster, a neurotic sea captain, a disturbingly violent Hollywood screenwriter, and an aging Cockney sailor; but his eccentricity persisted through variations of character. You can see the business with the thumbs in such different pictures as *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) and *The Barefoot Contessa* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1954). You can see it in a wartime short subject, *Hollywood Victory Caravan* (1945), where Bogart appears as "himself" and where, as Gary Giddins has observed, he stands with "thumbs under belt as though he were doing a Bogart impression" (2006: 43). You can also see it in a well-known news photo of 1947, when Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Paul Henreid, Richard Conte, John Huston and other Hollywood notables went to the US capitol to protest the HUAC hearings on supposed communists in the movie industry: Bogart stands front and center of the group, his jacket spread



and thumbs under his belt. He's imitating or copying a model of Humphrey Bogart.

Like Chevalier, Bogart was a star that comic entertainers liked to impersonate. Others have included Marlon Brando, Bette Davis, James Cagney, Kirk Douglas, Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Katharine Hepburn, Burt Lancaster, Marilyn Monroe, Edgar G. Robinson, James Stewart, and John Wayne. (One of the most popular subjects of comic impersonation as I write this essay is probably Christopher Walken, an eccentric if ever there was one.) Usually the stars are subject to impersonation because of a peculiar voice or accent, an oddity of facial expression, or a distinctive walk. Some have had all three. John Wayne had a deep voice with a drawling California accent, a habit of raising his eyebrows and wrinkling his forehead to express surprise or consternation, and an oddly rolling, almost mincing gait. Marilyn Monroe had a breathy voice, a parted mouth with a quivering upper lip (a quiver that, as Richard Dyer has observed, was designed not only to express yielding sexuality but also to hide an upper gum

line), and an undulating, provocative walk that emphasized her hips and breasts. Some of the legendary stars, especially the stoic males like Dana Andrews or the flawless females like Ava Gardner, were difficult to mimic except perhaps in caricatured drawings. But even the less eccentric actors had performing quirks or tricks, such as Andrews' tendency to cock his elbow out to his side when he drinks from a glass. There are so many famous names one could mention in this context that eccentricity would

seem the norm rather than the exception. Sometimes the eccentricity is *sui generis*, and sometimes it has an influence on the culture. Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe's mannerisms have been imitated by many other actors in more or less subtle ways; and James Cagney spawned a generation of teenaged performers, beginning with the Dead End Kids, who copied the early Cagney's

*There* (2007), a film in which Dylan is also played by Christian Bale, Marcus Carl Franklin, Richard Gere, and Heath Ledger. Blanchett is the only actor in the group who tries to look and behave like Dylan, and her performance is a tour de force, achieving uncanny likeness to the androgynous pop star in the most drugged phase of his career. But impersonation in fiction film, especially when performed

by a star, has a paradoxical effect; the more perfect it is, the more conscious we are of the performer who accomplishes it. Successful impersonation in real life is a form of identity theft, but in theatre or film our pleasure as an audience derives from our awareness that it's Curtis pretending to be Grant or Blanchett pretending to be Dylan, never a complete illusion.

The example of Blanchet serves to remind us that the film genre most likely to involve overt imitation or impersonation of one actor by another is the biopic, especially the biographical film that tells the life story of a celebrity in the modern media. Film biographies of remote historical figures or real-life personalities from outside the media seldom if

ever require true impersonation; we have no recordings or films of Napoleon or Lincoln, and the many actors who have played them on the screen needed only conform in general ways to certain painted portraits or still photographs. The audience seems inclined to accept fictional representations of historical characters and even modern celebrities as long as the performance is consistent and reasonably plausible: Willem Dafoe has played Jesus Christ, Max Shreck and T. S. Eliot without radically changing

**The classic-era stars were no less carefully constructed performers than the character actors; their identities were created not only by their roles but also by their physical characteristics and idiosyncrasies or peculiarities of expression. Nearly all actors in the period played types and tended to be typecast, but they also brought unique qualities of "personality" or personal eccentricity to the types they played**

ghetto-style toughness and swagger.

In the history of cinema there have been occasions when famous actors have not simply imitated but impersonated other famous actors. One of the best known examples is Tony Curtis's impersonation of Cary Grant in *Some Like it Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959). (Curtis's equally amusing impersonation of a woman in that same film is based partly on Eve Arden). A more recent instance is Cate Blanchett's remarkable impersonation of Bob Dylan in Todd Haynes's *I'm Not*





his physiognomy, and Sean Penn is quite convincing as gay activist Harvey Milk in *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008) even though he doesn't physically resemble Milk. When a conventionally realistic biopic concerns a popular star of film or television, however, the situation is a bit more complex. The actor needs to give a fairly accurate and convincing impersonation of a known model while also serving the larger ends of the story. No matter how accurate the impersonation might be, the audience will inevitably be aware that an actor is imitating a famous personage; but if it becomes too much a display of virtuosity, it can upset the balance of illusion and artifice.

Biopics in general are crucially dependent upon a dialectical interaction between mimicry and realistic acting, an interaction that can become threatened when a major star undertakes an impersonation. In *White Hunter, Black Heart* (1990), one of Clint Eastwood's most underrated films, Eastwood plays a character based on John Huston and in the process accurately imitates Huston's slow, courtly manner of speaking. Good as the imitation is, it has a slightly disconcerting or comic effect, if only because it's performed by an iconic star in the classic mold; any basic change in such an actor's voice and persona seems bizarre, almost as if he had donned a strange wig or a false nose. Probably for this reason, some of the most effective impersonations in recent films have been accomplished by actors who are not stars in the classic sense. Meryl Streep, for example, has performed a variety of characters and accents, so that when she impersonates the celebrity chef Julia Child in *Julie and Julia* (Nora Ephron, 2009) there is no great dissonance between the star persona and the role.

Cate Blanchett impersonating Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes, 2007) / Courtesy of Savor Ediciones

Like Streep, Phillip Seymour Hoffman's particular kind of stardom is based on his work as an actor, not on his sex appeal or public personality. One of the high points of his career is his impersonation of Truman Capote in *Capote* (Bennet Miller, 2005), which won several awards and was widely praised by people who had known Capote intimately. Whatever the shortcomings of the film, Hoffman's work is exemplary. We can see the actor behind the mask of Capote, but the actor doesn't have a consistent behavioral image that generates conflict with the mask. The impersonation, moreover, is never slavish, so nuanced and emotionally convincing that the display of imitative skill never causes a rift in the suspension of disbelief.

One phenomenon peculiar to celebrity impersonation in the biopic is that because of the realist nature of the genre it always takes a few scenes for the audience to fully accept mimicry and settle into a willing suspension of disbelief. This is especially true when a star performs the impersonation. Near the beginning of Steven Soderbergh's *Behind the Candelabra* (2013), for example, Michael Douglas reenacts Liberace's Las Vegas nightclub act, and I keep saying to myself: "It's Michael Douglas!" The thought never goes away but becomes less intrusive, in part because the film moves from public spectacle to increasingly intimate scenes in which Douglas gives a good deal of complexity to the character. When a relatively unknown actor performs an impersonation, the effect is slightly different because the audience doesn't know the actor's normal "self." An impressive instance is Christian McKay as Orson Welles in Richard Linklater's textual biopic *Me and Orson Welles* (2009).

Welles has been played by many actors, including Paul Shenar, Eric Purcell, Jean Guerin, Vincent D'Onofrio (aided by the voice of Maurice LaMarche), Liev Schreiber, and

Angus MacFadyen —but none have come this close to his looks, voice, and slightest movements—.

He captures the booming voice, the vaguely mid-Atlantic accent, the twinkle in the eye, the forbidding glance, and the heavy yet somehow buoyant walk. He's slightly too old (Welles was twenty-two at the time of *Caesar*) and never displays Welles' infectious laugh; but he merges with the character more completely than a star could have done and is just as convincing when he tries to seduce a young woman as when he proclaims ideas about theatre. To hear him read aloud a passage from Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* is to feel as if one were in the presence of Welles himself. Even so, the actor McKay is always present to us alongside the impersonation, taking obvious pleasure in the magic trick he performs, enabling us to see that Welles was not simply a flamboyant personality but an actor and director of seriousness and importance who could bring audiences to their feet.

Whenever we encounter an overt, creative impersonation such as McKay's Welles we can easily appreciate the singular skill of the performers. But imitation in all its manifestations has always been an important, even crucial feature of the art of movie acting. The rote repetition of predetermined gestures and movements, the development of model character types, the repeated performance of personal eccentricities, and the impersonation of historical characters may not be the most valued aspect of what actors do, but they are obvious sources of pleasure for the audience. They contribute to the system of genres and styles (as in the distinction between comedy and drama or between conventional movie realism and a director like Bresson), and more generally to the rhetoric of characterization and the formation of personality on the screen. In a more subtle and general sense, they complicate our ideas of personal autonomy and

## One phenomenon peculiar to celebrity impersonation in the biopic is that because of the realist nature of the genre it always takes a few scenes for the audience to fully accept mimicry and settle into a willing suspension of disbelief. This is especially true when a star performs the impersonation

individuality by making us at least potentially aware of the imitative aspects of our lives in the real world, as both personalities and social beings.

### Notes

\* *L'Atalante* thanks Savor Ediciones the licensing of the images from *I'm Not There* illustrating this article. The copyright holders of the rest of the images are not referenced in the footnotes since they belong to films currently discontinued in Spain, therefore we understand that the images have come into the public domain since no distribution company has purchased their license to commercialise them in our country. In any case, the inclusion of

images in the texts of *L'Atalante* is always done as a quotation, for its analysis, commentary and critical judgement. (Edition note).

### Bibliography

- ABRAMS, M. H. (1971). *The Mirror and the Lamp*. New York: Oxford.
- BRECHT, Bertolt (1964). *Brecht on Theater*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- BROOKS, Louise (1983). *Lulu in Hollywood*. New York: Knopf.
- COLE, Toby; CHINOY, Helen Krich (eds.) (1970). *Actors on Acting*. New York: Crown.
- DYER, Richard (1998). *Stars* (revised edition). London: BFI.

Michael Douglas reenacting Liberace's nightclub act in *Behind the Candelabra* (Steven Soderbergh, 2013)







*Me and Orson Welles* (Richard Linklater, 2009)

GIDDINS, Gary (2006). *Natural Selection: Gary Giddins on Comedy, Film, Music, and Books*. New York: Oxford University Press.

GIRARD, René (2008). *Mimesis and Theory*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

PUDOVKIN, Vsevolod (1949). *Film Technique and Film Acting*. New York: Bonanza Books.

WILLIAMS, Raymond (1950). *Culture and Society*. New York: Harper and Row.

James Naremore (born April 7, 1941) is Emeritus Chancellors' Professor of Communication and Culture, English, and Comparative Literature at Indiana University. Among his books are *The Magic World of Orson Welles*; *Acting in the Cinema*; *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*; *On Kubrick*; *Sweet Smell of Success*; and *An Invention without a Future: Essays on Cinema*.