

Actors in the Centre, Actors on the Margins

Pablo Hernández Miñano and Violeta Martín Núñez

Translated by David Morsillo and Jessica Kish

Since the beginning of the last century, the art of moving pictures has been (almost) completely dominated by anthropocentrism. Of course, there is nothing natural about this dominance; indeed, over the years a small number of filmmakers have tirelessly resisted it, exploring other avenues, developing other potential uses for that “invention without a future”. But the centrality of the human figure in cinema has been so firmly established, giving the appearance of a fact so logical and undisputable that it makes it necessary to point out something that should be obvious: that cinema could actually have done without actors and actresses entirely. In the time of the Lumière brothers, at least, it did not seem absurd to relegate models and extras to the margins or the background, losing sight of their figures in vast landscapes and urban geographies, blending the individuality of their faces into the crowds.

And yet, very early on the actor began to occupy a privileged position in cinema, a position that became all the more central with the development of the dominant cinematic model: the narrative cinema that was born—if we may allow the generalisation—with the conception of a ubiquitous camera that could move around the set and adopt different positions during a single scene, chiefly to capture the nuances of tear-filled eyes, the slight hint of a grin, or faintly trembling hands.

With their habitual technological determinism, the canonical stories of cinema highlighted the supposed consequences that the arrival of this new technology and its extraordinary mobility would have on the art of acting: the proximity of the camera, with its amplifying effect, would force actors to adopt a new performing style for the screen: less codified and mimetic, more sober and introspective. As James Naremore proposes in the article that begins the Notebook section, we can now question the extent to which mimetic techniques and Delsartean gestural systems really were abandoned because of cinema. And we may also ask ourselves whether it was not in fact the reverse that occurred: first came the actor, then the camera. Or was it not perhaps the eagerness to give up the gestures of the histrionic code, the desire to capture the subtlest reactions of the human body, that prompted D. W. Griffith's camera to move closer to the actors?

The body of the classical actor was, it might be said, simply *raw material* to film: a patient “object” under the film camera's gaze, subject to the power of directors and producers, even deprived of control over the final form of his or her own work. In short, a passive figure – although this is also a matter of great dispute, as can be concluded from the incidental dialogue established between Gonzalo de Lucas and Núria Bou in their articles on the work of Marlene Dietrich included in this issue's Notebook section. But the body of the classical actor was, above all, even if we admit its relative passivity, a body endowed with a formidable centripetal force, and actors did not need to participate actively in the big decisions (financial, staging or even editing decisions) to impose their appeal and organise everything around them: from the angle, the distance or the height of the camera to the duration of a shot or the spatial arrangement of lights and microphones on the set, everything revolved around their bodies, their mouths, their eyes. The actors and actresses did not even need to

intervene to bring about the technological revolution that gave them back their voices, even though the introduction of sound film (viewed in retrospect, and considering the thwarted careers of more than a few silent film stars to be a mere side effect) constituted the actor's ultimate conquest of the heart of the system, their final consolidation as a privileged body capable of determining, to a large extent, the forms and norms of classical cinema. And not just of classical cinema, but to a certain degree, other cinematic forms far removed from the legendary Dream Factory, as can be appreciated in Cynthia Ann Baron's study of the importance of acting in American independent cinema, or Nicole Brenez's analysis of the function of the actor, based on the actor's role in different movements in experimental film.

Paradoxically, film *analysis* has responded to this centrality of the actor in film *practice* (practically throughout film history, with logical and undeniable variations but few substantial exceptions, as notable as such exceptions may be) with the greatest indifference that could possibly be expected. Confronted with the expression of bodies with no grammatical system, of gestures with an almost infinite vocabulary, and of voices that complicate the meaning of every word with their modulation, their rhythm and even their timbre, film studies (of almost any movement and perspective) has all too easily chosen to bypass these figures of flesh and blood, which focus the *average viewer's* attention but threaten the coherence, rigor and supposed objectivity of the analyst.

Of course, we do not deny the difficulties analysts face when trying to incorporate—and as no less than the very heart of their object of study—an element as slippery, as difficult to describe with precision, as the actor's work undoubtedly is. How should we examine an idiolect, or the idiosyncratic gestures of an actress, as Marga Carnicé does in her analysis of Anna Magnani's art? How do we incorporate the actor's work into a narratological study, as Héctor J. Pérez proposes? What tools should be used to assess the discursive effects of a simple casting choice? How do we discuss presence? How do we measure energy? What patterns can we use to quantify photogenic qualities or empathy?

It is not our intention, of course, to resolve such complex issues in this issue of *L'Atalante*. Our humble aim here will have been achieved if the very different approaches presented in the Notebook section, in the Dialogue with Iciar Bollaín and in the discussion between filmmakers and actors compiled in the (Dis)agreements section, serve to demonstrate to the reader that the analysis of a particular conception of acting, the study of its methods and foundations, can reveal just as much or even more about the suppositions of a film than a detailed examination of its *decoupage*, its lighting style or its narrative structure; if, in short, this issue contributes to a reconsideration of the actor's work as a core element in the construction of the form and meaning of a filmic text. ■