Jörg Sternagel, Deborah Levitt, Dieter Mersch (eds.)

ACTING AND PERFORMANCE IN MOVING IMAGE CULTURE

Bodies, Screens, Renderings

With a Foreword by Lesley Stern

[transcript Metabasis]
Editorial

Media initiate cultural dynamics; they change the arts as well as discursive formations and communicative processes as bases of the social, and procedures of recording as practices of cultural archives and memory. The series Metabasis (Greek: change, transition) from the Institute for Arts and Media at the University of Potsdam sets out to analyze the medial, artistic and societal upheavals in relation to different cultural spaces and eras, and to trace the changes in narration and fictionalization as well as their reverse on processes of imagination. Furthermore, transitions between media and their performances are discussed, be it text-image-interferences, literary figurations and their impact on other arts, or transitions between different genres and their methods of representation. The series addresses the »inter-medial«, hybrid forms and borderlines, which suspend traditional ways of description and require new terms of description and expression. It also explores the complex and hard-to-define realm of in-betweenness, where traditional, handed-down forms become unstable and new forms become productive.

A new volume will be added to the series at least once a year. Topics draw from a wide spectrum including New Media, Literature, Film, Art, and Image Theory as part of a regular intervention into current debates of Cultural and Media studies.

The series is edited by Heiko Christians, Andreas Köstler, Gertrud Lehnert, and Dieter Mersch
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Foreword
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»Always Too Small or Too Tall«: Rescaling Screen Performance

[W]hat cinema once was can no longer be seen. For most of us it is already dead or in its death throes. For my part, I believe it has long since gasped its last, even if, like a god or any natural phenomenon, it may have taken up hiding to negotiate the conditions of its resurrection.

Raúl Ruiz

Imagine All that Heaven Allows (Douglas Sirk, 1955) on an iPhone in the palm of your hand; imagine Elizabeth Taylor televised, larger than life in Auschwitz; imagine careening down a rabbit hole; imagine how the cosmic acting out of a dinosaur might mutate, be instantiated in the gestures of a mid-twentieth century suburban family. Fantastic scenarios all, ranging from the dystopic to the heterotopic, but they all exist, are made manifest in some variety of moving image. And they all are mobilized by that spark engendered when cinematic imagination is fired by technological innovation and potential, and simultaneously inscribed by the archaic traces of ancient or defunct or even overly familiar technologies. Cinematic imagination doesn’t necessarily translate to »cinema« or the movies as we have been used to thinking of them, but all these images serve as provocations in thinking through the changing ways of the actor, her affects and effects, in contemporary moving image culture. Though as soon as I utter the word actor and use the personal pronoun I am confronted by an interrogative, or series of questions: can we still speak of the actor’s body, should we consider the agency of things, what to make of composited bodies, of new modes of interaction that hardly bear relation to »the movies«?

Acting and Performance in Moving Image Culture exhibits a faith in what I might venture to call »negative heterogeneity«. While eschewing any attempt to present a synthesized approach to con-
Lesley Stern
temporary image culture it nevertheless offers ballast in the tensions set in play between the three key terms: bodies, screens, renderings. Across the pages and between the essays, in ideas that resonate, rhyme, refute one another, this collection is more curious about the unexpected, more engaged in seeking out surprises than in laying out blue prints, offering taxonomies, cataloguing tropes. The approach is exemplified for me in Vivian Sobchack's essay. Her title, »Being on the Screen: A Phenomenology of Cinematic Flesh, or the Actor’s Four Bodies«, alerts us to the fact that while it is absurd to talk about the body in cinema it is equally ridiculous (and unproductive) to reject the kind of detailed analysis that might enable a refinement of our understanding of bodies, screens, and renderings in contemporary moving image culture. But just as the figure of the »film actor« morphs and transforms in this new environment, demanding new approaches to the work of performance, as the editors point out in their introduction, so too are the varieties of detailed analysis likely to morph.

It is then, in the spirit of this book, though at an oblique angle to it, that this foreword is written. Skimming over the surface of the changing virtual environment and dipping in and out of »cinematic« examples I take »renderings« as the key term, the term of mediation between »bodies« and »screens«. It is customary for studies of acting and performance in cinema to focus on the actor, on the body, or on the conventions which shape viewing perceptions. But today in a climate of proliferating screens and modes of production the question arises with renewed acuity of how performance is rendered by technological determinations—including not just digital versus analogic (this perhaps matters least of all) but also the specificity of media, the mode of delivery and reception, the size of the screen, how private or public the viewing situation. Of course we all know that bodies are fantastical images, brought into being by the apparatus, we know the auratic power of the cinematic institution and the dematerialization (and remaking) of cinematic bodies effected by technology. However, if these older theoretical verities hold good for new media developments, simultaneously new performative modalities needle us into revisiting earlier instances of technological innovation.

Or so it turned out to be for me. Many of the ideas I toy with were generated by the suggestive juxtaposition of the sections of the book, in particular »Presentations and Representations«, »Affects and Affections«, »Actions and Animations«. These suggestions were lured into life by two encounters, encounters with friends that prompted an exploration of this performance-technology nexus. The last few years have seen an explosion in the cinemas of 3D
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movies and I saw one of the first of this wave with Miriam Hansen: Tim Burton’s Alice in Wonderland (2010). She was tickled by the deployment of 3D, and for hours and days afterwards spun a theoretical web linking ideas on innervation with the innovations of Alice in Wonderland, illuminating cinema’s capacity to imbri cate in particular our experience of scale. The link between scale and affect was sharpened for me by the encounter with an event staged by Steve Fagin, Only for Dummies, Punctured Utopia of the 21st Century, over several weeks in the summer of 2010. This event, described by Fagin as a miniseries, was commissioned by a large Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, though you did not need to be present at the museum in order participate, all you needed was a cell phone. The platform of the iPhone and the syntax of Facebook were used as structuring principles in Only for Dummies but Utopia was the topic, inflected via figures and images drawn from the Soviet Revolution, the invention of Hollywood, and the Bauhaus (the Master of Ceremonies or «star» is the ventriloquist dummy Charlie McCarthy, the wisecracking sidekick from The Chase and Sanborn Hour radio show of the late 1930s and 1940s). It is a rich work but what struck me most forcefully was an obvious «wrinkle» in time and spatial orientation: the appearance on my iPhone of familiar moving images from the great period of Hollywood cinema. It was astonishing, shocking, and surprisingly moving to cradle Judy Garland in my hand, experience her being hypnotized, to feel Jane Wyman gazing into her own reflection in the television set, Judy Holliday moving in a single long take, singing »The party’s over«, Sterling Hayden saying as he has always said and still with feeling, »Lie to me«.

The process of recalibration, of rescaling, set in motion by Only for Dummies carried over into my viewing of a very different work, Terrence Malick’s Tree of Life (2011). A common complaint about the film pivots on the perceived disequilibrium between on the one hand the grandiosity of what is commonly referred to as the »creation« interlude, marked by technological exhibitionism, and on the other hand an intimate drama of family life, grounded in conventions of realism in which acting is crucial. The question of gravity, which had been tickling subcutaneously through Alice in Wonderland and Only for Dummies, came into focus as an aspect of scale.

Meanwhile on the internet I was visiting a new genre of film criticism, a revamping of the video essay which depends on a capturing and rendering of film images, a mode of address that often conjures intimacy although it is broadcast through new configurations of public space and the public sphere of new moving images.
there it was a short trip back to Jean-Luc Godard’s videographic work, *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1989–1998). This is where I came to rest in the end, fixating on a fragment from this extensive work, a moment snatched from time, watched repeatedly on my television and laptop, a moment that seems to open up the question of how performance might be inflected by its technological mediation. Needless to say, immersion in a Godard work is never a coming-to-rest; rather, many of the questions to do with scale and gravity, the changing world of moving images, the death of cinema and the emergence of the internet, were simply crystallized and complicated here. And although *Alice in Wonderland*, *Only for Dummies* and *Tree of Life* were eventually swallowed up and disappeared like Jonah down the maw of the whale, I want to briefly skate over the provocations they set in motion for me.

**Too Small Relative to Whom or What?**

»Why is it you are always too small or too tall?« the Mad Hatter asks Alice. The question of course is relative. Too small relative to whom or what? And it only makes sense if the person who asks the question remains constant in size. The cinema has always been predisposed to mess with scale, to unhinge a world where relativity reigns, where inanimate things and live actors share the realm of performativity. Generally speaking, however, in narrative fiction anyway the disturbance of scale is effected within a framework that follows certain rules (eyeline matches, reverse shots), and safeguards certain reference points (generally privileging the human body as a point of identification for the viewer, as the site where bodies and emotions are grounded). But often the prospect of sensation (and the promise it brings of excessive pleasure) overrides the imperative of stability. We go to the cinema (to the theater, the palace) in order to lose not find ourselves.

[1]In the final analysis every image and every sequence of images, even the most classically constructed cannot be assigned a fixed meaning because it will always be in a relation to a multiplicity of other images, whether present or virtual, real or imagined. In other words image production necessarily arises out of a reservoir of virtual images, the photographic unconscious, for which it provides a provisional actualisation, but crucially never a completely stable form.

*Raúl Ruiz*