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Crutches and Deceptions: Makeup, Doubles, Cinematic Realism and Screen Performance

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PREAMBLE

Thank you Valerie for inviting me to the lyceum cinema circle to talk about my research! Today's talk comes from the book I have just finished writing a week or so ago for Rutgers University Press, which is called *Making Believe: Screen Performance and Special Effects in Popular Cinema*. In the book I cover David Lynch's *Elephant Man* and Darren Aronofsky's *Black Swan* in two different chapters – one on makeup, and the other on the use of doubles, so I will do my best to talk about both here in a way that makes sense.

It might be helpful though before diving in, to first explain what has driven my research:

I find looking at acting in relation to special effects interesting because acting is thought to be the most human and real element of filmmaking, and special effects the most technical and artificial.

Usually in film studies they have been considered separate things but I think we deepen our understandings of both film acting and cinematic illusion when considering them together.

1)   For one thing, acting itself in our culture contains a tension between authenticity and illusionism – at the most basic level, for

instance, actors are real people with real lives, feelings and real bodies, but they pretend to be other people or creatures– sometimes people or creatures with bodies very different from their own. They produce the outward expression of emotions and sometimes they seem to be really feeling those emotions themselves – and in doing so they have long fascinated Western philosophers (Diderot, Rousseau etc) as they raise questions such as: are people ever truly as they seem? Are appearances deceptive?

2)   The second point is that looking at acting and special effects together helps us understand screen illusion on a deeper level. Take the issue of seamlessness – normally that word is used in relation to digital effects (how well they are integrated with live action) or makeup – how well it seems to sit on the skin, whether or not we can see the edges of a bald wig for example. "Seamlessness" refers to films where the "joins" or means of construction are sufficiently hidden that we forget that it is a construction. But my argument is that seamlessness is not just a visual thing where we can't see the joins on the screen, but that there is another dimension of movement, emotion, and voice that comes from actors – in the case of prosthetic makeup, it is not just how it sits on the skin, but how the actor convinces us that this prosthetic is part of their body. It is similar in the case of stunt and dance doubles, or singing doubles – we must believe this is *one* body we are seeing or seeing and hearing. We must forget that momentarily the actor might not be themselves, or they may be a composite body. This is not just a matter of editing, but performance as I show here.

What I have done in my research is track histories of different special effects techniques in relation to acting to see what we discover about both. Crucially, I have found there is a cultural specificity to our perspectives of what is real or unreal on screen, and that special effects have been a factor in the ways we value some screen performances as better than others.

Today's talk is in two parts. The first part is a brief history of how prosthetic character makeup became acceptable on film as an avenue towards realism, when at first it wasn't; why it is still seen as a problem in some conceptions of acting (largely from the stage); how the makeup design was achieved in *Elephant Man*; and how John Hurt's performance in Chris Tucker's makeup transformed stiff dead rubber into an illusion of a living suffering person in a prison of flesh.

In the second part, which is a bit longer, I will talk about *Black Swan*, and how digital face replacement and many, many months of grueling ballet training transformed Natalie Portman from an actress into the illusion of a professional ballerina. The issues the second part are slightly different. They revolve around the questions of "did it matter that Portman didn't perform all her own dancing, and to whom? To what extent is this just the same as older instances of doubling, and at what point does illusion shift into the morally dubious territory of deception or hoax?" Again, I will be giving you a potted version of my historical research into how earlier audiences felt about doubles, how the use of doubles shifted from an immoral deception to an acceptable and necessary illusionism, and how and why our expectations of actors and authenticity on the screen have shifted over time.

Ok so onto part 1: makeup and the elephant man

In the first decades of North American cinema, makeup was seen as something associated with the stage and inappropriate or problematic for a medium that aspired to be taken seriously as a new artform. Why?

1) It part it was because of a belief that film as an art had a close affinity with photography, and benefitted from showing real places, actions and things, rather than painted sets and makeup. The camera in its closer view drew unwanted attention to the artifice of paint on canvas or fake beards and noses. As Fred Dangerfield said in his vocational guide *How to Become a Film Artiste* (1921) "Whatever realism the picture is supposed to portray is lost when the make-up becomes noticeable. The characters on the screen no longer seem real, but become merely puppets." (48).

I would say in some ways not much has changed if we consider the reviews for Leonardo Di Caprio in the *J Edgar Hoover* biopic, as his "old guy face" was compared to that of a muppet, specifically Statler and Waldorf. So makeup can make an actor seem suddenly unreal especially if we know what they look like without it. All we see is the makeup and it can be very distracting.

2) Related cultural reasons. For, by contrast, early Japanese cinema was largely filmed kabuki theatre – makeup was fully expected in that context. Many Western inema cultures though were informed by the late 19thC naturalist movement in art, lit, theatre, preferring the natural face. Going further back we also have a long-running cultural valorization of authenticity, which places not just an aesthetic but a moral value on nature as truth and artifice as deception.

This continues in different forms over time, and is also, as we shall see, highly relevant to the next section when I talk about doubles and Black Swan.

In the 1910s cinema (at its extreme) the value of photographic realism manifested in the belief that the screen should show the real itself. In this view, motion picture producers should cast only those who already resembled the part according to popular physiognomic frameworks, or were in actuality of the type to be represented: a butcher should be played by a butcher, a soldier by a soldier, and so on. It was strongly argued that the realistic requirements of the screen were such that an aging Sarah Bernhardt could not play a teen Juliet.

However, those who championed the development of photoplay acting as an art disparaged the casting of types and elevated those actors who could be seen as demonstrating "versatility, " and who could transform themselves against the charge that, as films tended to cast actors who already looked or were the part, what people did on screen was not acting but "being themselves". For while the foundation of film was thought by many to be photographic realism – best served by using actual people and places, the core of acting as an art is often thought to be proteanism – the transformation of the self. Makeup was and is, of course, a useful tool to assist the actor's transformation, making the actor up to visibly simulate a different type of person, and this also served another kind of enduring cultural fascination – the re-made self. The fan magazines were full of pictures of actors and actresses in various costumes and makeup with captions marvelling at how different the one star could look, how unrecognisable (as an aside, we might see this also feeding into the interconnection the movies developed with consumerism and the cosmetics industry, encouraging movie fans to transform themselves and make themselves over.)

So: Cinema is and never has been never one thing. It has always been intertwining strands of different things in tension. The main tension special effects and acting both get at is one about the value of nature versus the value of transformation.

Keep these things in mind: the high moral as well as aesthetic value we place on authenticity, and our fascination with proteanism – as they connect to *Black Swan* as well.

Another key criticism of makeup for acting was that it was a crutch that did the work of characterization. This view came from the 19thC naturalist stage: that the best actors were ones who could transform themselves by generating the character within their mind, thinking the part, concentrating intensely, and the character's features and ways of moving would manifest on their body (think young, become young; think old, become old - cf Eleanor Duse, Paul Muni, Jean Hersholt).

Makeup Legitimation

So within these contexts of values, how could transfiguring makeup reach for aesthetic legitimacy? The answer was anatomical knowledge and social observation. For example, Lon Chaney snr. Celebrated man of a thousand faces known for his performances in the 1920s films The Phantom of the Opera, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, The Penalty etc, often faced criticism of his artifice even as he fascinated audiences with his ability to transform himself beyond recognition. In the early 1920s He attempted to distance his work from stagey melodramatic artifice, and bring it into alignment with the more highly valued frames of realism. For instance, he proclaimed to *The Washington Post* that he did not "depend on whiskers and makeup for his parts," but closely studied people of the street, following them and mimicking the

posture and behavior of the individual types he found in the street that might inspire his characterization: "The man himself had to be studied, and not merely his outward appearance" he said. He framed his prosthetic makeup designs in terms of anatomical realism and knowledge of the human face , claiming to "never build an artificial contour that is not based on an exact study of anatomy. To do otherwise, he declared, would mean failure […] Muscle by muscle he builds it up." He stressed that his transformations were never simply about the surface of things. Rather, his synthesis of makeup and acting for each role relied on "a knowledge of human anatomy and the observation of human characters in action."

In this way Chaney realigned the artifice and superficiality associated with his makeup performance practice with nature and realism. He was careful to not just talk about the body but observable behavior – it was from behavior that we might understand a human being's true inner character, in the way they stood, walked, interacted with the world, he argued. Moreover, he also claimed that it was not just a matter of putting makeup on his face and body and hoping they would do the work by cuing the viewer to see signs of character. The weight of this makeup, of the bodily distorting harnesses he wore for some roles contorted him, leaving his body wracked in pain and discomfort, and through this bodily suffering, he claimed to reach an affinity with his characters' experience and way of being in the world.

Ever since Chaney, makeup artists working within the frameworks of realism have continued to stress anatomical knowledge and pursue the aims of developing materials that photograph as skin and fleshlike on film, and of simulating ever more convincing skin, bone, hair. and flesh – especially as faster film stocks and cameras became able to capture greater image detail. So too, the actor's labor and suffering under prosthetics is usually announced to show

their commitment, work, and connection to their character's body. I think these reach a kind of apotheosis in The Elephant Man, however, before discussing how it does this, I want to also acknowledge that the film's makeup has been criticised because it is not as if problems with makeup went away.

Unreal connotations / crutch

As you know, *The Elephant Man* is a most unusual biopic, focusing as it does on a late nineteenth century London celebrity, Joseph Merrick (in the film called John) who suffered from a congenital condition that caused the wild growths of tumours and the enlargement of his head, and had him dubbed The Elephant Man. Makeup artist Chris Tucker was highly lauded for the painstaking realism of the makeup he created, and John Hurt was nominated for a Best Actor Oscar for his performance behind this makeup. Centrally concerned with the relationship between physical appearance and interiority, body and soul, the film has been called immensely powerful, terrifying and moving, but also dismissed at the time of its release by some critics as overly sentimental, cloying, and mawkish.

At the time of the film's release, New York Times reviewer Vincent Canby praised the film, actors, and makeup artist. But he also acknowledged the potentially problematic status of Hurt's elaborate disfiguring makeup, in terms of its generic associations:

"John Hurt, as John Merrick, is a monster with a bulbous forehead, a Quasimodo-like mouth, one almost obscured eye, a useless arm, and crooked torso. It's to the credit of Christopher Tucker's makeup and to Mr. Hurt's extraordinary performance deep inside it, that John Merrick doesn't look absurd, like something out of a low-budget science-fiction film." For other reviewers though, the dubious monster movie connotations of the makeup

were inescapable. Painting Hurt as a rather laughable figure "encased in layers of foam laytex (sic) to approximate Merrick's enlarged head," one writer was reminded of other "fondly recalled movie monsters" such as the cantina aliens in *Star Wars* (1977) or the monster in *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954).[i]

To be fair, the film itself cues such generic reference points. Merrick's appearance is gradually revealed through the murky visual register of horror. Shot in black and white so as to reduce the garish and artificial appearance of the makeup, it recollects the Universal horror films of *Frankenstein* and *The Mummy*. The early framing of Merrick as a monster is deliberate: we are led to his onscreen revelation from behind the craning necks of gasping gawkers and grubby freak-show exhibit curtains. We see him next as a distorted silhouette behind a medical screen exhibited to bearded respectable scientists. Finally we encounter him as a meek-voiced figure, his face hidden by a burlap sack. we hear of his monstrosity from others before we see him for ourselves. What is suggested but not shown incites our dread and frames our first encounters with the makeup as monstrous. Once fully revealed, what we see is a misshapen figure and the faint glimmer of a wary eye from deep within rubbery masses of tumorous flesh. There is a reason though for all this as the film moves us through different perspectives from outside Merrick – Merrick as othered through horror and medical frames, to inside Merrick, to understanding his subjectivity and experience. I think this is something that has been missed in some of the criticism of the film, especially by those who posit Bernard Pomerance's stage play as superior to the film.

SLIDE

CRITICISMS OF MAKEUP FROM STAGE

In the stage version, in part for reasons of practicality, the lead actor never wears disfiguring makeup – imagine if he had to put it on every night - but must instead suggest deformity with a distortion of stance and face and the way others on stage respond to him. This is not just practicality at work: it is driven by a belief that it is a more "pure" form of acting for the actor to do it without makeup, and that to simulate Merrick's real appearance would be a distraction for the audience – we would not be able to see past the grotesquery to the beautiful soul beneath. Therefore, Merrick's beautiful soul must be played by a beautiful man. We again see here some of those 19thC aversions to makeup as deception and crutch playing out here.

In discussions of the play and the achievement of playing Merrick without makeup, Hurt's performance in prosthetic makeup is often brought up as a negative reference point: "a burlap sack and a mouth full of marbles and your grandma could play the elephant man' said one critic in 1992. This view sees not just the makeup as a distracting spectacle that dehumanizes the real life Merrick, but as *doing* the actual work of performance and characterization.

The problem for me is that this view sees makeup and acting as separate spheres rather than thinking about what happens when they work together. The work that Chris Tucker and John Hurt did for Elephant Man essentially was an attempt to recreate or resurrect the body of a once living person of highly unusual appearance, of whom photographic evidence and bodily remains exist.

How achieved?

Tucker actually used the remains of Merrick's body to provide structural information for the prosthetic design. He found reference in late 19th Century photographs of the real Joseph Merrick, written testimony from medical

journals, as well as Merrick's skeleton and plaster life-cast of his face and torso (with Merrick's hair still embedded in the plaster), borrowed from the London Hospital Museum. From this he discovered the extent of Merrick's visible and invisible deformities: impacted wisdom teeth, a bone projecting through his jaw into the back of his spine obstructed the man's breathing, speaking, and eating, while painfully twisting his torso.

Tucker constructed an elaborate set of prosthetic appliances comprising 22 different pieces which had to be built up on actor John Hurt's body and face, section by overlapping section, from a teeth plate worn inside the actor's mouth, to the liberal use of foam latex in the simulation of the 'large warty, smelly masses of flesh' encasing his cranium. Hurt's performance was also informed by knowledge of Merrick's insides. Seeing the structure allowed him to imagine and then embody it himself. His viscous snuffles, groans, and wheezes, his excruciating pauses, his audible exertions to breathe and speak give a fleshy, suffering materiality to the rubber, a sense of mouth and airways obstructed by wayward growths. *The Elephant Man*'s publicity placed emphasis on Hurt's daily seven hours in makeup for the role. We hear of the discomfort endured by his own body in the service of transformation, reminding us that beneath the foam latex is a man who for six weeks during filming could only eat "two eggs beaten in orange juice [...] sipped through a straw", and could not lie down while in makeup, so would have to nap, sitting up, "exactly like Merrick."[iii] But it is not a simple identification with suffering through a glimpse into the man's daily discomfort. The performance itself is informed not just by what this body feels like, but an imagined subjectivity of what it would be to look like this – the exhaustion and timidity of being trapped in that skin and the gaze of others would make you who you are. When he does speak, the timidity of his voice suggests he has spent a lifetime in this body, his utterances not just

strangled by internal deformations but he has internalised the revulsion mirrored in the faces of those who see him.

If Pomerance's play attempts to show Merrick's common humanity and the ridiculousness of prejudice, Lynch's much more visceral film does not shy away from acknowledging that we **are** our bodies and cannot be separated from them – their weight and aches and fatigue or their spry lightness determines how we move through the world. Their appearance determines how others treat us and the ease or difficulty with which we move through social life.

It is only by trying to imagine what it is to live in this body and accrue the wounds of its social and physical history, that the actor can imagine Merrick's interiority. In a truly seamless performance, the interior and exterior are fully imbricated.

Ok, now I turn to black Swan and the problem of doubles.

Opening shot cues

Darren Aronofsky's Oscar-winning ballet psychodrama *Black Swan* (2010) opens with a long shot of a lone dancer. Illuminated in a cone of light against a black void, her pale tutu fans from her waist as she strikes a graceful pose. She begins to move to the sound of low, mildly ominous strings, and we cut to a view of her baby pink satin clad feet, shuffling in dainty steps on pointe, flattening, rising, and pivoting effortlessly in a virtuosic display of delicate strength and control toward the camera. The camera slides backwards as if to give her room to move, and continues to follow her entranced, still at foot level, as she rises on tapered calves, steps, pirouettes, and again shuffles lightly on her toes across the stage, before gracefully folding her legs and sinking down to the floor and into the shot. As she floats her hands down like a pair of birds and turns her head with an air of poised expectancy, we see her face and

discover that the dancer whose skilled precision we have been invited to admire is the actress Natalie Portman.

How achieved?

Except, apparently, it wasn't. This, and other dance sequences in the film were produced by digitally combining fragments of Portman's body and movements with extended footage of more complex techniques executed by a professional ballerina, Sarah Lane, into continuous shots. The most demanding moments of dancing virtuosity were achieved by first filming Lane dancing in full costume, hair and makeup with dot markers on her face to guide the mapping of Portman's facial performance. Portman was then shot in identical attire, walking through the steps of the sequence on flat feet, with great care taken to match the lighting, angle, and motion of her head to that of Lane's. 2-D Face replacement shots were used in numerous places – sometimes for hallucinatory effect, when Portman's character, Nina is haunted by her smirking doppelganger – and sometimes for moments of technically demanding ballet that we are supposed to take as diegetically real.

My concern was, does this substitution matter, and if it does, *how* does it matter?

Character unity – serves persuasiveness

Certainly we can say that digital face replacement assisted our immersion in the film's world by selling the character's reality as a dancer. By digitally placing Portman's face onto a professional dancer's body, and showing us this dancer gracefully twirling en pointe through extended takes, it fostered the illusion of Portman's continuous presence in the role. I don't know about you but when I was watching the film, I was instinctively looking for cuts – I've seen enough dance on film to know that if we see a shot of some feet, and then

a long shot from a distance, and then a close or mid-shot, that doubles are being used to do some of the work, and that the feet do not belong to the star.

But the long take with no cuts has been used to authenticate performance

It was for this reason that Fred Astaire tended to demand that his dance sequences were shot in extended takes with minimal editing, close enough to see the face, but far enough away to see the whole body. He needed to show that a) it was all him and Ginger, and b) that they could sustain a routine without making mistakes. As we see here in this lovely clip from swing time.

Black Swan however contains no cuts between dancing feet and actor's face, enabling us to make believe we are seeing one unified person, rather than a person who sometimes is embodied by Portman but who, when she dances, is possessed by someone else. In this sense, the continuity of Portman's presence as Nina was a well-crafted illusion.

Deceptive publicity

The use of face-replacement in the film itself is not the problem. The problem was that the illusion supported a deceptive publicity narrative about the extent of Portman's transformation from actress into dancer, and that this narrative erased the work of the real dancer, and irritated the hell out of the dance community.

I watched *Black Swan* in the cinema upon its opening in my city, cued by advance publicity and reviews that acclaimed Portman for transforming herself through a year and a half of training into an "accomplished ballerina" for the role of obsessive perfectionist, Nina, and for performing "most of the ballet sequences herself." The primary emphasis in interviews with the director and star was on Portman's physical commitment to and preparation for the role.

Both stressed that the actress had danced until she was thirteen, so already had the foundations of a dancer in her body's muscle memory. Portman trained for months in classical ballet to transform her body "into muscle and bone" putting herself through "extreme physical pain" in the service of her metamorphosis into Nina.[iii]

For the lay viewer it was easy enough to believe that Portman had merged with her character, in part because the actress's elegant, sinewy build, small features and dark doe eyes create an easy imaginary fit with the physical "type" of the dancer.[iv] Moreover a scan of the closing credits seemed to confirm Portman's total self-actualization in this regard, because there was no dance double listed for the role.

Dancers saw through it

This illusion was not seamless for all viewers, as we measure a film's claim to realism against our own knowledge or expectations of what we know or believe to be real or true. For dancers, much of the dancing in *Black Swan* is apparently laughably phony. The suggestion that an actress could transform herself into a ballet dancer in a little over a year is comically implausible, for a ballet dancer's body is like a bansai, growing into a form dictated by its daily practice. Dancers were not surprised then, when in March 2011, soon after Portman had won the Golden Globe and Oscar for her performance, Lane came forward alleging that Portman had only performed 5% of the full body shots, while Lane performed most of the technically challenging parts such as pirouettes and dancing en pointe in her stead, her face digitally replaced: "the full body shots, the feet, the turns … that's all me."[v] After training very hard Portman could move her arms convincingly but it took a lifetime to produce the bodily strength and technical facility of a professional dancer, and the actress could not effect the technical footwork on pointe or the pirouettes. Not

only was Lane not credited for this work, but she claimed that a producer from Fox Searchlight had called asking her to refrain from interviews during the promotional and Oscar lead up phase of the movie's publicity: "They were trying to create this façade that she (Portman) had become a ballerina in a year and a half […] so I knew they didn't want to publicize anything about me."[vi] Wendy Perron, Editor-in-Chief of *Dance Magazine* also noted that the original visual effects reel, which had revealed the use of face-replacement with arrows and text on screen, had been removed from Youtube and replaced with another version where this information was erased.

As this information came to light, it prompted debates about the value of Portman's performance, and the extent to which the publicity narrative, rather than her performance manifested on screen, had led to her winning the Oscar. For some film critics like Matt Singer however, the issue just boiled down to simmering professional resentments between dancers and actresses. It should not matter to anyone else beyond the dance community, the argument went, because only a gullible dupe would believe that an actor could become a professional ballerina. He argued: "movies are illusions. To create those illusions, filmmakers employ tricks like special effects and doubles. Replacing Lane's face with Portman via some computer-aided trickery is just a technologically advanced version of a technique done for decades."[vii]

And of course, on an obvious level he is right - movies ARE illusions, and this is just a new more seamless way of creating a performance with a double. However there are two things

Double controversies emerge in times of technological change

1) when we look back at the history of doubling, the black swan controversy replays similar controversies that have emerged at earlier

periods where there is a technological change that bamboozles viewer's perception.

As I will show, There were the stunt double controversies of the 1910s, there were the song dubbing controversieis of the late 1920s and early 1930s with the coming of sound – yes just like in singing in the rain, and then the mid 80s the rise of MTV rapid editing brought a controversy with Flash dance – Jennifer Beals was said to do all her own dancing, but it was subsequently revealed that she only did the close ups, a jazz ballerina doing most of the hard work, and indeed that final audition scene actually features four bodies: a ballerina, an acrobat, and one male breakdancer. Looking at how viewers respond when they are told that they have seen an actor do something extraordinary, only to find out it is a lie reveals that viewers don't take movies to be completely illusory – but we get different kinds of competing pleasures from movies.

Our pleasures in film are multiple.

2) The phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack argues that when we watch films and TV we might move in and out of states of what she calls "documentary consciousness" (such as when we recognize a familiar place on film, or a pair of actors who we know are in a relationship) and "fictional consciousness" (when we are immersed in story). The two states of documentary and fiction consciousness can rub against each other, connecting the film to our world, and deepening our sense of its realism. Examining the ways these interrelated kinds of viewing pleasure have worked historically, we see that doubles of different kinds, their concealment and their revelation have had a key part to play.

Cinema has a longstanding desire on one hand to flaunt its ability to show us the real itself, but also to flaunt its ability to transform reality –

it's that same tension between the pleasing moral value of nature and the fascination with proteanism again.

So: to briefly cover the stunt doubling controversies of the 1910s…

It is significant that the first doubles in the cinema to come to light were not human – they were dummies. In early films such as Edison's *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (1895) an actress knelt to put her head on the block, the film was stopped, and a dummy was substituted before the axe fell. Industry and fan journal columns eagerly revealed the clever tricks employed by the cinematographer to create shocking illusions of bodily destruction: decapitation, trains running over inattentive photographers on rail tracks, people being flung from cliff-tops to be dashed to pieces on the rocks below, or automobiles being driven off cliffs or bridges into tumultuous bodies of water. For instance, a 1907 issue of *Moving Picture World* featured a lengthy article over several issues, which began by saying that many of the scenes people see in the "photographic pantomime" are "not real, but feigned." The author then went on to reveal details of how such scenes of cliff falls, for instance, were routinely constructed for the screen by filming a struggling living performer, stopping the camera just at the point of imperilment, and joining this shot to one of a dummy in long-shot at the moment of calamity. The main line here was the cinematographer's cleverness as an illusionist.

Trickery undermines belief

But at the same time in the 1910s this fascination with photographic trickery existed in tension with a high promotional value placed the recording of real thrills and actual action in the action serials (things like The Perils of Pauline, or The Hazards of Helen). So cinema had a problem – on the one hand, a key attraction was photographic trickery and an audience desire to feel

clever and know how tricks were done, but on the other a key attraction was real feats of daring. There were huge arguments in the trade press that the revelation of secrets was undermining audience belief in what they were seeing on screen, and the pleasure of real thrills, as they began to think everything was faked, and there was no danger. There were reports that viewers were no longer believing any spectacular action they saw onscreen, as they were overheard in movie theaters remarking that it was "only a dummy" in 1915 when seeing a serial action star Lillian Hamilton leaping from a stage coach into her co-star's arms, or explaining to fellow viewers that "they do all these things by double exposure" when seeing Lionel Barrymore brave rapids barely clinging to a tree in *The Devil's Garden* (1920).

Need for authentication: stunt doubles revealed, injury lists.

In an attempt to reauthenticate the action on screen, sometimes doctors reports were released with the films, listing the injuries sustained by the castor instance, the serial *Trey O' Hearts* (1914) included a "doctor's report" on injuries to the cast "Cleo Madison, a badly lacerated kneecap and severe bruises about the back and shoulders; George Larkin, one ear nearly torn off and bruised and battered legs and body…"[viii]

In this context, the revelation of the general existence of real stunt people was partly strategic: to reinject thrills in a context of doubt and knowledge Even if it wasn't the star necessarily, the acknowledgement that *someone* on screen was risking his or her safety could help reauthenticate the film image's relation to a physical embodied reality. At the same time movie producers did not say who was being doubled. It was acknowledged as a general practice, but it was a problem if a particular star was thought to use a double even for the most dangerous of stunts. We see stunt doubles now as a necessary part of illusionism. Acceptable and routine.

Bad for stardom: deception. Phoney.

But in the 1910s it was framed in moral terms as a deceptive practice – a misrepresentation of the star's capabilities. Fan magazines in the late 1910s predicted that the double would soon be a thing of the past, driven out by the public demand for greater authenticity. They envisaged that the market for would-be stars was becoming so crowded with actors jostling for a place on the screen that the phony idols would be driven out by "real" actors willing to do for the camera whatever the action demanded. A hierarchy was created between "real actors" who did their own stunts and were on screen the whole time, and "false idols" who gathered the acclaim but rested in their dressing room while the stunt performer was doing all the hard work. A Cinderella kind of narrative emerged.

Again, as with makeup, this takes us back to a moral opposition between nature and artifice – nature as truth, sincerity, the real thing / artifice as deception.

The value of authenticity in performance: real, unity, coherence

Such distinctions between idols and actors fed into the emergence of an aesthetic argument for authenticity in performance. This aesthetic argument is intimately connected with the view that film should strive to be an art composed of real living people, actual locations, and genuine actions rather than illusory transformation and magicianship. It also connects to the belief that good acting requires the actor to strive towards the manifestation of a unified, rounded, coherent character. As an article on the tendency of the "real" actor to eschew a double put it: "there are good psychological reasons why many photoplayers refuse help by a double. It is bound to detach a player temporarily from his role. He loses the 'spirit' – at

least, for a few minutes – and may not properly warm up again --- at least, not soon enough." Using a double to live through part of the role in the actor's stead would, according to this logic, automatically lead to a perceptible disunity or incoherence in the character. How could the actor truly connect with the spirit of a heroic character, if, when the character enacted this heroism, by say, swimming through rapids to rescue a drowning baby, the actor retires into comfort and safety and another takes their place?

Of course, such reasoning falls apart the moment you ask if an actor playing a villain has to actually strangle, stab or shoot someone in order to connect to the character's malevolent spirit. Likewise it can't be supported if, we recognize that whether an actor uses a double or not, the very technological conditions of filmmaking are disintegrative: actors must embody a character in fragments of time and with pieces of the body, and as Vsevolod Pudovkin argued, this fragmentation always already poses obstacles for the actor's struggle to create a lifelike image of "organic wholeness."[ix]

Two key things shifted the moral terrain around stunt doubling and the acceptance of illusionism.

Danger, risk --- "low pleasure", and connoisseurship of well-crafted illusions

1) in the 1920s There was growing public awareness of the dangers for extras and doubles involved in making thrill pictures. *Screenland* raised awareness of the shockingly unsafe conditions in which extras and doubles worked, presenting such performers as the martyrs of "jaded" viewers, with an illustration of crucified extra girls, and directly asked the reader

"are YOU the one to blame?" for the toll of injured and dead.[x] *The Los Angeles Times* featured a story highlighting the mortal injuries, concussions, and actual deaths sustained by stunt doubles, and their low rates of pay compared to that of the stars for which they worked.

By the late 1920s physical risks that had previously been framed in the fan magazines as "reasonable chances" were now being positioned as unreasonable risks for the star to take, for largely financial reasons.

2) The other important thing was that just as Chaney had shifted the frame around makeup from dodgy artifice to scientific craft, the same thing happened across special and visual effects in the studios. They reframed visual effects from trickery to well-crafted scientific illusion, to be appreciated by a connoisseur. The viewer who demanded real action and thrills was reframed as a low kind of viewer – of morbid and superficial tastes

However the coming of sound and the voice dubbing scandals of the late 1920s – where Richard Barthelmess was promoted as singing and playing piano in *Weary River* but it was subsequently found that a saxophonist from the coconut grove had been contracted to be Barthelmess's voice for 2 years -- this indicated the debates and the value of authenticity in performance were not dead, as both moral and aesthetic arguments were made. Unlike the stunt, singing or dancing required a sustained performance, remaining in view for longer. Director Ernst Lubitsch argued that it was not just technically bad for realism, but artistically bad for the actor's unified expression of feeling. He said "no matter if the synchronization with the player's lips is mechanically perfect, the effect is bad. The feeling behind the words does not coincide with the expression on the actor's face."

Largely, though, the argument against voice doubles was moral rather than aesthetic: it being dishonest to claim another's voice as the star's own. Fan magazine writer Muriel Babcock claimed that "an irate and hero-worshipping public" had complained bitterly to the studios and fan magazines that Barthelmess, a star they had seen as "noble," "should stoop to such a cheap trick as to pretend someone else's voice was his."

Authenticating strategies

In this context of doubt (just as with the revelation of stunt doubles some films promoted their films with injury lists), actors were under pressure to prove their authenticity – Gloria Swanson invited reporters to hear her in person in an informal concert. Buddy Rogers, in response to rumors that his multi-musicianship in *Close Harmony* had been faked, toured several cities with the movie. During personal pre-screening appearances, he reportedly picked up each of the seven instruments played in the movie in turn, and demonstrated his abilities in order to silence the skeptics.[xi] For others though, the focus shifted to the difficulty of faking it. Mark Larkin wrote a column in *Photoplay* on voice and music doubling. He stressed the difficulty for the actor in miming accurately enough – fingering the strings of a banjo so that they corresponded to the sound track – to sustain the illusion, especially knowing that musicians may be in the audience.

Faking it is hard

As Portman and Kunis demonstrate in *Black Swan* "faking it" as a dancer on screen, even with a double, is not easy. A NYT dance article said of the film: "if you're going to look and move like a professional ballerina, you were going to have to train like one" and develop the "physical markers for the ballet dancer" – "sinewy lean muscles, upright carriage,

pressed down shoulders and tell-tale elongated neck." So particular kinds of actions and vocations still require performing skills and the acquisition of bodily techniques in order to bridge the cut between the body of the star and the double – this is what I mean about the actor contributing to "seamlessness."

It was in the 1960s as the studio and star system collapsed that doubles began to get more publicity in their own right, and in the 1970s when they were finally credited. At the same time, screen acting in the wake of the method had been redefined as a kind of labor that required intense concentration of the mind, a journey into the character's psyche.

Body transformation acting

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the mental and emotional labor of acting became increasingly inseparable from the actor's body, and the work the actor does to transform their body for a role. Since the 1980s we have seen a steady increase in the proportion of bodily transformations – such as weight gain or loss – among actors in Oscar nominated and winning roles.[xii] An actor's body, its visibly altered contours and the acquisition of techniques (such as boxing or butchering meat, in the case of Daniel Day Lewis in *Gangs of New York*), becomes an index of their discipline and commitment to the role, and the source of their screen character's heightened unity and physical coherence.

When I talked about makeup before, I said that the weight and constraints of prosthetic makeup and fat-suits are often spoken of as determining something of the actor's embodied experience. In their physical discomfort such devices allow the actor to connect temporarily with the character

whose fabricated flesh they wear. However, the self-fashioned body occupies a much higher place in the hierarchy of acting value.

Self-fashioning is taken as irrefutable external proof of the actor's inner character (their commitment, discipline, hard work), for they have had to remake their bodies over a period of time, outside and beyond the illusory apparatus of film-making. Such performances are also taken as evidence of something *really undeniably real* at the heart of the movie-making process – it follows in the footsteps of earlier authenticating strategies.

The actor's self-transformation though is doing more than this. It is not just promotion-fodder that speaks of their moral character – their seriousness, their discipline. It is not just a strategy to combat perceptions of artifice, or to sustain character unity and coherence across the fragmenting effects of film-making. It is also seen as visible evidence of an actor's embodied "journey" into their character's psyche – a sustained one-to-one connection with character experience through the body.

This is also how we might appreciate Portman's performance: not as digitally faked virtuosity, and something contributing to the seamlessness of the face-replacement, but as producing a convincing embodied neurosis. The character's mind, after all, is the centre of the role – we are inside her head, witness to her dreams, hallucinations and psychic breakdown. Indeed, Portman herself was lauded for reaching almost a breaking point as she pushed her body beyond its limits, and through doing so, gaining an internal affinity with the obsessive neurosis of her character, Nina. As the Darren Aronofsky quote in the production notes claims: "somehow, with her incredible will and discipline, Natalie became a dancer. It took ten months of vigorous work, but her body transformed and even the most serious dancers were impressed. I'm convinced that the physical work also connected her to the emotional work."

We can see the physical evidence of Portman's work and exertions written in the straining sinews of her neck and arms as, as Nina, she breaks apart emotionally on screen. Re-evaluating Portman's performance in terms of embodied emotion rather than as a display of technical virtuosity, I find her believability in the role is in the easy yet nervy lightness of her movements, as she hurries to rehearsals, as if her body were perpetually fuelled by anxious adrenaline and kale. If to us, her anguished face and the fragile exhausted cracking of her voice rings true; if she seems in her trained body and in its movements, for the purposes of screen fiction *real enough* as a ballet dancer: why then go to such lengths to conceal the fact that a professional dance double was used to flesh out the character's talent? This was an attempt by Fox Searchlight to stretch the "transformational acting" line too far – placing Portman in the award-winning category of Robert deNiro in Raging Bull, Charlize Theron in Monster etc – but taking the narrative beyond just body and skill to an actual embodied profession. Indeed, I contend this was an unnecessary mis-step on the producer's part that, once revealed, only succeeded in muddying the perceived value of the star's performance, as it replayed the Cinderella-esque discourse that we saw emerge around earlier erasures of doubling performance labor: real performers and false idols.

In the age of digital effects when manipulation of the image is so easy, it is often the concern now that we cannot believe anything we see. But that same concern haunted viewers of the 1910s, and then again in the 1920s and 30s. movies have been tricking us long before the digital image. Films have always had to authenticate themselves and their performing bodies, and viewers in turn have had to become more vigilant in learning the tell-tale signs of manipulation – the cut between feet and face, a disconnect between voice and face or a throat not moving as it should – indeed comedy can be predicated on

such rules if we think abut the dance sequence in naked gun 2/ 1/2 – where the implausibility becomes the joke.

Producers also though at earlier time realized that a kind of compact was needed for certain films where the key attraction was the real thing. If performers maintained their value, if the screen maintained its affective value. It was important to demarcate the faked from the real in order to preserve our pleasure in and appreciation of the operation of both. Publicity must refrain from outright deception otherwise the whole house of cards falls and all we are left with is fiction.

Thank you.

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i "'Elephant Man': A Beastly Cinematic Tease," *Washington Post*, October 17 1980, C1, C4.

ii Tom Buckley, "At the Movies." *New York Times*, September 26 1980, C12.

iii See for instance, Adam Markovitz, "Natalie's Dark Victory," *Entertainment Weekly*, January 7 2011 , 32-6'; Black Swan blu-ray

Region 4 extras "in character with Natalie Portman."

iv However, as Adrienne L. McLean has pointed out, the common view of what a ballet dancer's body should look like comes not

from the diverse reality of dancer's bodies, but from countless movies about ballet dancers who are invariably thin, white, and female.

Dying Swans and Mad Men: Ballet, The Body, and Narrative Cinema (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008).

v Lane's credit was the ambiguous title "Lady in the Lane," rather than "dance double." Christopher John Farley, "How

Much Dancing Did Natalie Portman Really Do in 'Black swan'?" *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2011,

http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/03/25/how-much-dancing-did-natalie-portman-really-do-in-black-swan/.

vi Ibid.

vii Matt Singer, "The 'Black Swan' Dancing Controversy Makes No Sense," *IFC,* March 29, 2011 http://www.ifc.com/2011/03/the-

natalie-portman-black-swan

viii "In the San Gabriel Canyon," *The Universal Weekly*, October 31, 1914, 5.

ix Vsevolod Pudovkin, *Film Technique; and Film Acting, The Cinema Writings of V.I. Pudovkin*. 1954, 25.

x H.B.K. Willis, "The Wages of Realism," *Screenland*, May 1923, 37.

xi Babcock, "Song Doubling Now in Discard," B13.

xii Ibid, 98-9.