
Actors Behind the Camera: Introduction

Nicole Cloarec

University of Rennes 1

Delphine Letort

Le Mans University

What in modern parlance is known as 'multi-tasking' was the norm in the early days of the movie industry. Seminal figures such as Charlie Chaplin, Mack Sennett, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd were at the same time actors, screenwriters, directors, and producers. The advent of Classical Hollywood put an end to this: actors were under contract, their careers determined by the studios and ruled by the star system. In this context, those actors who turned directors (for example Charles Laughton, Robert Montgomery, Ida Lupino) were all the more remarkable. Maverick actors-turned-directors such as Erich von Stroheim and Orson Welles soon encountered hindrances in completing their directing projects and relied on acting to earn a living. The break-up of the studio system, however, and the development of independent cinema, enabled a young generation of actors (Dennis Hopper, Paul Newman and Robert Redford among others) to try their luck behind the camera. Since the 1970s, the list of actors-turned-directors has increased dramatically, ranging from old-timers like Warren Beatty, Robert de Niro, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Robert Duval, Diane Keaton, Angelica Huston, and Tommy Lee Jones to actors who are also known for their political commitment, like Tim Robbins, George Clooney, Jodie Foster, as well as stars such as Tom Hanks, Sylvester Stallone, Mel Gibson, Kevin Costner, Sean Penn, Michael Keaton, Ed Harris, Kevin Spacey, Ben Affleck, Andy Garcia, Edward Norton, Ethan Hawke, Natalie Portman, Angelica Jolie, James Franco, Johnny Depp, Joseph Gordon-Lewitt, Stanley Tucci, and Bradley Cooper.

The trend is not confined to the American film industry, as testified by the films of British actors Peter Mullan, Gary Oldman, Tim Roth, Alan Rickman, Paddy Considine, and Vanessa Redgrave, Sarah Polley and Don McKellar in Canada, and Russell Crowe in Australia. What then makes an actor want to go behind the camera? Is it just another whim, or an unconscious desire to get even with directors? Do actors nurture the presumptuous belief that their experience will make them better equipped to direct other actors or do their films' aesthetics offer more leeway for actorly performances? In the case of actors-turned-directors who also appear in their own films, how can they film themselves? Does it testify to the fantasised ideal of immediacy, obliterating signs of acting itself so as to equate playing and being? Is it perhaps the case, as Jacqueline Nacache suggests, that "*To become oneself, to play nothing but oneself – such was, rightly or wrongly, every actor's goal from the early days of cinema*"?¹ Or, on the contrary, is it a way of foregrounding the thespian quality of the actors, relating their work in film to the perhaps more prestigious theatrical stage?

From Charles Laughton's one-off masterpiece *The Night of the Hunter* (USA, 1955) to the steady output of former actors who have become as well-known for their work as director as for their acting career (John Cassavetes, Woody Allen, Clint Eastwood, Kenneth Branagh), what we might call 'actors' films' certainly do not constitute a genre of their own. Nonetheless, for all their variety, what is most striking is the huge number of true 'passion projects' and how they foreground personal commitment. Their involvement may be directly linked to autobiographical elements. The coming-of-age story appears to be a classical trope of actors' directorial debuts, whether they evoke their childhood or more generally their hometown or country (for example the New York American-Italian background of De Niro's *A Bronx Tale* (USA, 1993), Israel in the case of Natalie Portman's *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Israel/USA, 2015) or, on a more controversial note, the alleged Native American heritage claimed by Johnny Depp for his poorly received debut feature, *The Brave* (USA, 1997). But the blurring of the frontier between cinema and personal life can be even more troubling when family members are closely involved in the process of film-making. The case of John Cassavetes immediately comes to mind. Paul Newman offered another interesting case when he chose to direct both his wife and eldest daughter in *Rachel, Rachel* (USA, 1968) and *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* (USA, 1972).

Political commitment is also a recurrent feature. The films of Tim Robbins, which tackle themes as various as the connections between folk music and Republican politics in his satirical mockumentary *Bob Roberts* (USA, 1992), the capital punishment issue in *Dead Man Walking* (USA, 1995), or theatre and politics in Depression-era America in *Cradle Will Rock* (USA, 1999), are consistent in their dedication to an ideological cause. Other examples include Robert Redford's *The Milagro Beanfield War* (USA, 1988), taking sides with the downtrodden against big business; George Clooney paying tribute to anti-McCarthy broadcast journalism in *Good Night and Good Luck* (USA, 2005); Sean Penn expressing a singularly gruelling version of the actor/director couplet when adapting Jon Krakauer's novel *Into the Wild* (USA, 2007) or making a film about the risks of a humanitarian mission in Africa that may resonate with personal experiences in the case of *The Last Face* (USA, 2016); or Vanessa Redgrave creating *Sea Sorrow* (UK, 2017), a documentary investigating

¹ Jacqueline Nacache, *L'Acteur de cinéma*, Paris: Nathan, 2003, p. 118. *Our translation.*

the historical context of the current migrant crisis. This social or political commitment is all the more acute in the case of actors from minority groups (Sidney Poitier, Richard Pryor, Spike Lee, among others), who, because of their celebrity status, inevitably carry the 'burden of representation'. Their decision to step behind the camera often reveals a self-conscious endeavour to redress stereotyping, to make their own communities more visible, and to blaze a trail for greater diversity in the industrial workforce.

Stepping behind the camera, of course, undeniably involves an element of risk-taking. The move is often perceived as a vanity project, especially when the actors overtly play with their established screen *persona*. Some notorious examples of financial disasters such as Marlon Brando's only film as a director, *One-Eyed Jacks* (USA, 1961), are now part of the legend, but critical and commercial failures do not seem to have affected actors' careers greatly if we consider for example the cases of Johnny Depp or James Franco. Nonetheless, what is clearly at stake in all cases is the creative control of the film-maker and the symbolic power associated with it. In this respect, one may wonder if 'actors' films' are not the perfect illustration of the *auteur* 'theory' that American film critic Andrew Sarris extrapolated from French film criticism, whereby a film is first and foremost the product of the director's personal vision, a means of conveying his/her worldview in spite of overarching constraints imposed by the institution of cinema.

A place behind the camera is thus perhaps the best position from which an actor can truly 'author' himself/herself, as Sébastien Lefait demonstrates in his article in this volume about Ralph Fiennes's first film as a director, *Coriolanus* (UK, 2011). The concept borrowed from Shakespeare is equally true of the other actors-turned-directors studied here, who all clearly inscribe themselves in the lineage of 'authors' – be they writers, playwrights, singers and composers, or other actors-turned-directors. At the same time, exploring cinema through the category of actors-turned-directors also helps us reflect on the collective dimension of film-making, and in particular on how their own experience informs their decision-making as directors, as well as their other crucial involvement in the film-making process, such as Al Pacino's passionate involvement in Brian De Palma's *Scarface* (USA, 1983), whose authorship critics attributed to the actor, Sean Penn's involvement in the making of James Foley's *At Close Range* (USA, 1986), Emma Thompson's adaptation of Jane Austen for Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (USA/UK, 1995), or Vicky McClure's influence on the progression from Shane Meadows's *This is England* (UK, 2006) to its subsequent television sequels (UK, 2010, 2011, 2015).

While there has been a renewed interest in actorial studies in the wake of star biographies and studies of the star system more broadly², this phenomenon has yet not been much investigated.

² See, amongst others, James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988; Jacqueline Nacache, *L'Acteur de cinéma*, Paris: Nathan, 2003; Vincent Amiel, Jacqueline Nacache, Geneviève Sellier, Christian Viviani, eds., *L'acteur de cinéma: approches plurielles*, Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007; Christian Viviani, *Le Magique et le vrai: l'acteur au cinéma, sujet et objet*, Aix-

This issue of *Film Journal* aims to explore this largely uncharted territory, comprising case studies, by a team of French scholars, which focus on questions of identification, authorship, and adaptation. Identification with its subject is at the core of Kevin Spacey's biopic of Bobby Darin, *Beyond the Sea* (USA, 2004), just as Al Pacino's obsessive fascination with Oscar Wilde is the starting point for his *Wilde Salome* (USA, 2011). Adaptation is also a common feature of the other three cases – for Ralph Fiennes, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*; Alexander Stuart's novel *The War Zone* for Tim Roth's film of the same name (UK, 2011); in the case of Sarah Polley's first film, *Away from Her* (Can/UK/USA, 2006), a short story by Alice Munro. However, what is striking is that they all use the generic conventions of either biopics or film adaptations to devise indirect self-portraits – whether to tackle sensitive personal issues (Spacey's and Roth's traumatic childhoods, or, in Polley's third feature film *Stories We Tell* (Can, 2012), her quest for her biological father) or to assert their status as creators. In so doing, the films not only provide a reflection on the key notion of performance, they also create a fruitful dialogue with other artistic forms (literature, theatre, music) and most importantly with other film genres and traditions (the biopic, adaptation, social realism).

In his article 'Imitations of Life: From the Biopic to Self-Portraiture in Kevin Spacey's *Beyond the Sea*' Christian Viviani argues that Kevin Spacey's musical biopic indeed recounts the story of the singer and actor Bobby Darin but that it also fulfils a personal fantasy. It is probably no coincidence that Spacey chose such a versatile and controversial artist as the subject of his second foray as a film director. Impersonating the artist himself in a film he co-scripted and co-produced, Spacey assumes artistic control over Darin's biopic, foregrounding his own singing performances. How should one interpret such a filmic commitment on the part of the actor-turned-director? Speculating on the importance of ideas about 'mimicry' and 'imitation', Viviani contends that the presence of Spacey competes with that of his subject, and that his homage builds on the pleasure of appropriating (even by proxy) the popular success of a singer whose powerful vocals marked his childhood.

Christophe Damour, in 'Adaptation, Experimentation, and Performance: Al Pacino's *Wilde Salomé*', examines Pacino's work as both actor and director by focusing on his third film, *Wilde Salomé*, an experiment in hybridity that interweaves footage of stage performances and backstage activities involved in Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* under the direction of Estelle Parsons, documentary footage about Wilde's life, and self-reflexive shots of Pacino himself in the character of Herod. Significantly, Pacino intertwines several narrative lines to ponder over his own career in the light of other iconic figures but also expresses a form of body language that is the actor's hallmark, and which Damour analyses closely. While in *Wilde Salomé* Pacino self-consciously plays with the mythical *persona* he has assumed, the film is very much in line with his entire work, both on visual and thematic levels, through its preoccupation with the act of looking and with the figure of the demiurge personified by Al Pacino.

en-Provence : Rouge profond, 2015 ; Christophe Damour, eds, *Jeu d'acteurs: corps et gestes au cinéma*, Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2016.

Sébastien Lefait focuses on another significant case of stage adaptation in his article 'Authoring Oneself: The Refusal of Performance as Cinematic Authorship in Ralph Fiennes' *Coriolanus*'. If adapting Shakespeare may not seem so surprising for a famous Shakespearean actor, Ralph Fiennes' choice of *Coriolanus* for his first experience behind the camera is certainly worth exploring. Lefait argues that the play provides "the ideal repository for a study of the actor turned director, or, in Shakespeare's terms, the actor who tries to be 'author of himself', i.e. of his own character". Indeed, the play itself addresses the question of authorship in relation to acting and performance. Its protagonist's tragic flaw is his reluctance and persistent inability to play a part in the political arena. As a consequence, his downfall results as much from *hubris* as from his failure to master his own image, which is tantamount to controlling his destiny.

Fiennes updates the play to a modern world where the means of information and communication are foregrounded as mediating instruments. Political action is equated with mere performance, which Coriolanus resents as a role imposed on him, a grotesque distortion of his true self. To escape from this "to-be-looked-at-ness complex", Coriolanus withdraws to "a world elsewhere" where he can remain invisible, but is obliged to defect to the enemy. For Lefait, Fiennes's adaptation perfectly underscores the metaleptic dimension of the play itself, whereby Fiennes, "like Coriolanus in the play and as Coriolanus in the film, metaphorically erases his *persona*, claiming he can move to a location where he can be more than just an actor". As such, Fiennes's directorial debut is also a "reflection on the transition from being a mere actor to being able to direct oneself".

Writing about an actor-turned-director leads the film scholar to explore the intimate links between acting and directing. David Roche's article 'The Conflicted Self-Construction of the Actor-Director: Tim Roth's *The War Zone*' is based on a biographical investigation into the covert and painful motives that prompted Tim Roth to direct *The War Zone*. While acknowledging the power of the actor to shape the discourse constructed on a *persona* that he self-consciously performs, Roche explores Roth's most personal memories to better understand his undertaking a film about child abuse. While the process of adapting Alexander Stuart's novel *The War Zone* allows the film-maker to share personal stories of his own, Roche detects visual and narrative details that convey Roth's filmic strategies to deal with trauma, arguing that "the adaptation serves as a mask for the artist to tell a very personal story". *Mise-en-scène* is highly significant for maintaining the sense of secrecy which binds the family together in *The War Zone*, and which Roche invites the viewer to identify through detecting the invisible signs of malaise. Film analysis in this case turns into an emotional exercise that echoes the genuine response of non-professional actors interpreting characters confronted with a situation that visibly affected them.

In 'Questions of Intimacy and Distance in Three Films by Sarah Polley', Nicole Cloarec offers a portrait of Sarah Polley through a close look at the films the actress has directed – *Away from Her*, *Take This Waltz*, and *Stories We Tell*. Although the three films do not form a trilogy, they articulate common thematic and aesthetic features which Cloarec identifies as signifiers of her authorial style. Like the other actors turned directors featured in this issue, Polley uses the process of film-making to indirectly look back at her own life and career. Her focus on female characters allows her to fathom intimate questions about the female body – be they related to ageing or to sexuality. Adapting Alice Munro's short story for her first film, *Away from Her*, allowed her to consider a woman's life through the voice of another, endowing her female character with a more active role as an onlooker. Easy

characterisation is eschewed, including in the autobiographical documentary *Stories We Tell*, which interweaves several narrative voices to convey a complex family story that makes it difficult to establish the genre's claims to truth, but which offers a self-reflexive meditation on how acting and directing interact with life.

The various films studied here provide further striking evidence that actors are definitely not just 'cattle', as Hitchcock so notoriously claimed to Truffaut in 1962, but intensely creative figures with complex and varying interests in the process of film representation. Through highlighting some significant case studies combining historical, genetic and aesthetic analysis, we hope to throw some light on this largely unexplored phenomenon and pave the way for further studies. The admittedly vast scope encompassed by the work of actors-turned-directors enables us to delve into some critical perspectives from a de-centred perspective, questioning the collaborative nature of film-making, the part played by the actors' *personae*, as well as fundamental ideas to do with acting, performance and film authorship.