

BOOK REVIEWS

Rewriting Indie Cinema:

**Improvisation, Psychodrama,
and the Screenplay**

by J. J. Murphy. New York: Columbia
University Press, 2019. 360 pp., illus.

Hardcover: \$105.00, Paperback: \$35.00,
and E-Book: \$34.99.

The Art of American Screen Acting:

1960 to Today

by Dan Callahan. Jefferson, NC:

McFarland & Company, 2019. 232 pp., illus.
Paperback: \$35.00.

Virtuoso:

**Film Performance
and the Actor's Magic**

by Murray Pomerance. New York:

Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 368 pp., illus.
Hardcover: \$108.00, Paperback: \$31.40,
and E-Book: \$25.16.

Beyond Method:

Stella Adler and the Male Actor

by Scott Balcerzak. Detroit: Wayne State
University Press, 2018. 280 pp., illus.

Hardcover: \$84.99, Paperback: \$27.99,
and E-Book: \$18.99.

Faces and fingers. There seems to be so much in so little: the tap-tap-tapping of nails or the friction conjured between two palms, captured on film, externalize nervous worlds of interiority. On screen we imagine that the ridged hairs of a furrowed brow or the small cavities in pursed lips tell us something. We watch actors play people who live alongside one another in a way that is reminiscent of how people behave in our own world.

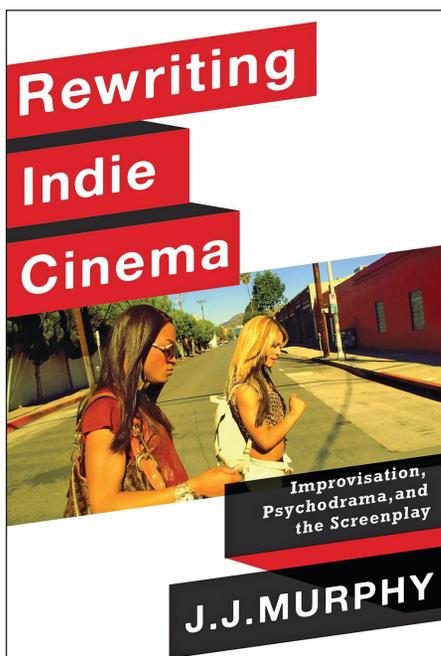
The founding of the Actors Studio in 1947 dominates common sense histories of modern acting. As much as Elia Kazan is associated with the institution, Lee Strasberg and the “method,” which encouraged actors to turn inward and recall sense memories, has exerted an almost mythological hold on popular conceptions of acting. For Strasberg and American popular culture more widely (and notably not for Strasberg’s teacher Konstantin Stanislavski) the muck of personal experience brought with it the capacity for artistic performance. Turn inward, find something of the self in the character and then embody all that is inscrutable. If the character is vengeful, find your space of anger and wreak vengeance on set. One need only employ a Freudian excavation.

The tortured artist remains one of America’s most prominent tropes. The idea that an actor’s roles can reveal some fundamental personal truth holds a gravitational pull when an answer is needed to understand the tragedies of life off stage (see: River Phoenix, Heath Ledger, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Brittany Murphy). This isn’t new, but the emergence of the method and other approaches indebted to Konstantin Stanislavski in the 1950s, shaped the association of actor and character. Not only was Marlon Brando associated with Stanley Kowalski, but, as Shonni Enelow has written in *Method Acting and Its Discontents*, that performance became synonymous with Strasberg’s “method” itself (despite Brando never studying seriously with Strasberg). The labor of acting became masculinized, cast in the armor of a tight white T-shirt, statuesque features, and the sensual swagger of a hard day of work. The self dissolved into the character. The books considered here probe the workings and art behind that dissolution. Each is interested in the challenge of describing the art of an actor’s craft and championing the possibilities of performance.

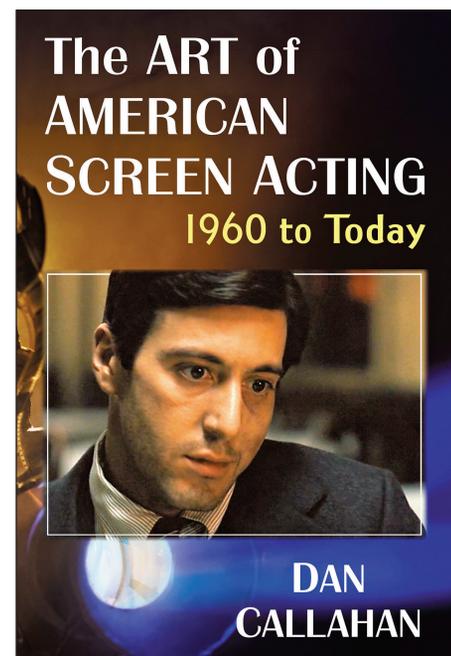
J. J. Murphy’s *Rewriting Indie Cinema* charts an underheard history of independent cinema, defined by the shifting significance and stability of the screenplay, and the collaborative relationship between actors and directors. Production histories of films

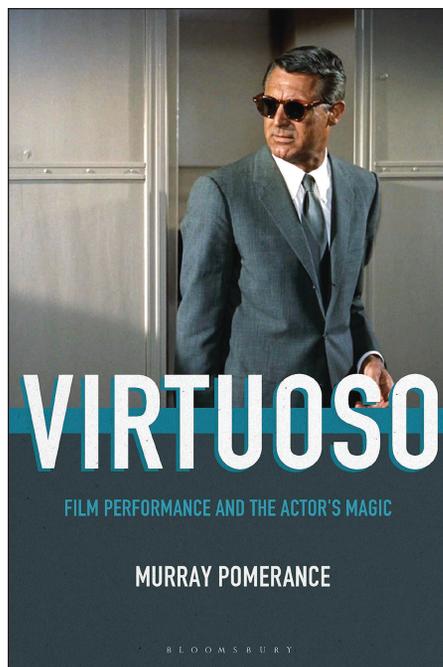
such as *Killer of Sheep*, *Bad Lieutenant*, *Wanda*, and *Putty Hill* are tethered together by two concepts: improvisation and psychodrama. Improvisation, a notoriously capacious and sometimes slippery term, here refers to as “a performance that unfolds in the moment, either in rehearsal or production, or during both.” Improvisation becomes the engine and product of independent collaboration. That collaboration is important to the development of something akin to a script and Murphy focuses on three main categories related to production: completed scripts that actors change during filming; outlines and treatments that are expanded during shooting; and ideas that blossom through the improvisational synchrony of cast and crew.

The psychiatrist Jacob Moreno’s theories laid the groundwork for this analysis. Murphy suggests that psychodrama, a kind of theatricalized therapy where the intimate aspects of one’s life become part of a public performance, fray the limits between art and reality. Being becomes acting and the “boundary between the fictional character and the performer’s life is erased.” The book opens with an infamous tale of such a transformation: during the filming of Norman Mailer’s *Maidstone* (1970), Rip Torn unexpectedly smashed Mailer’s head with a hammer. The act was caught on camera and used in the final cut of the film. A disruptive moment of violence, predicated on the real-life relationship between two people, met the moment of performance.



66 CINEASTE, Spring 2020





Murphy's history is an important alternative to the popular accounts of American independent cinema that focus on the reconfigured power of the studios in the late 1960s on one hand and the influence of Indiewood in the 1990s on the other. Rather than solidify a canon of auteurs like Terrence Malick, Quentin Tarantino, and Steven Soderbergh, Murphy's eleven chapters bring together a wide array of figures from Lionel Rogosin and Jonas Mekas to Kent Mackenzie, Barbara Loden, and Joe Swanberg. Brief plot summaries helpfully line the book, though Murphy's expansive approach sometimes glides past important political-ethical questions behind the scenes. Frequently, the idea of a psychological "breakthrough" performed on camera is privileged as itself a worthwhile endeavor, creating something akin to an art-at-any-personal-cost approach. This is troublesome when Murphy details Shirley Clarke's controversial *Portrait of Jason* and Andy Warhol's *Drunk*.

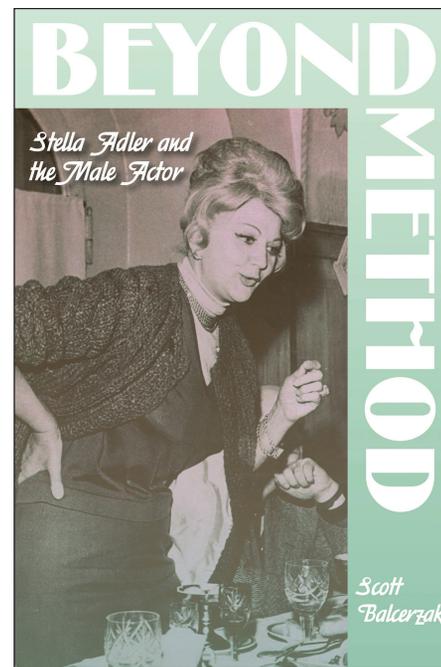
Warhol's film was first screened in 2016, in part, because the subject of the film, the activist/documentarian Emile de Antonio, threatened to sue Warhol if it was ever shown. The short piece grew out of de Antonio's claim that he could drink a quart of scotch in twenty minutes. Murphy moves close to romanticizing the result of de Antonio's bravado, writing that it "is terrifying to watch because there is a real possibility that de Antonio might die. *Drunk* is nothing short of a game of Russian roulette, played for the camera." Similarly, Murphy frames *Portrait of Jason* as an unsuccessful film because it "fails to unmask its protagonist." There is something missing here, including the complicated entanglements of a white director chiding a queer black man with liquor and insults. Rather than seeking to

unmask Clarke's protagonist, we might look at her film to understand that not all masks are equal and they certainly don't operate in the same way.

Of course, acting is itself a kind of masking. In *The Art of American Screen Acting: 1960 to Today*, Dan Callahan suggests that there have been two dominant trends in acting over the last sixty years—naturalistic, signified by "the method," and theatrical, reflected in the work of Laurence Olivier and Anthony Hopkins. The title of Callahan's book promises an investigation into the *art* of screen acting, but the forty brief chapters, each of which is dedicated to a single figure (twenty actors and twenty actresses), provide less an analysis of acting technique than a set of career rundowns sprinkled with biographical information and assessments. Though these chapters are short, they are rarely concise. Oscillating between tabulated statistics and conversational prose, Callahan's book reads as a collection of off-the-cuff impressions. Performances become the stuff of data entry or flippant analysis. As a kind of annotated list, Callahan frequently relies on comparisons between actors to make his point, inviting the reader, for example, to "try to imagine Warren Beatty or Robert Redford or Ryan O'Neal" in the role of Michael Corleone, before suggesting that in the end "they could not have gone as far as [Al] Pacino does." Assuredly, the world would be a different place if Ryan O'Neal's star identity was tied as much to *The Godfather's* cutthroat lead as it were to *Love Story's* Oliver Barrett IV. If there is great fun to be had in counterfactuals and imagined alternative histories, however, such routes too frequently lead here to dismissive rankings. Actors become vessels to champion or denigrate, but in either evaluation the actor as an artist who makes choices disappears. Michael Fassbender's range allegedly comes from his "Irish side" and his "German Side," while Callahan praises Jane Fonda's performance in *Klute*, but surprisingly suggests that her vocal change was likely the result of a struggle with bulimia since "all that vomiting is bound to affect the throat." That kind of speculation swallows the *art* in the title of the book.

There is more than enough space for subjective descriptions of an actor's art, but within such brief analyses, where small actions become representative of entire careers, a certain precision is important. For Callahan, "acting talent" is fundamentally "an expressive face and an expressive voice." How an actor might use that face or voice is left unclear. Whatever Callahan's rubric for evaluation or selection may be, I had hoped that he might articulate his own connection to his subject.

Catalytic moments, created by, for the most part, Hollywood actors are the focal points in Murray Pomerance's *Virtuoso*. Pomerance's book is littered with intriguing



moments, but it reads as odd addendum to his previous, more robust *Moment of Action: Riddles of Cinematic Performance*. In the first chapter, Pomerance offers a history of the "virtuosic moment," stressing that "acting works like musical performance," going on to claim that the pianist Franz Liszt inaugurated the concept of virtuosity; after Liszt, actors were no longer in "service of the script" but rather "the script could be seen as serving the performer."

Still, what Pomerance is referring to, beyond an exciting moment that enchants, can be difficult to understand. At one point, he writes that a "virtuosic display must rise above the emotional, tonal, gestural, and figurative plane of all else that is going on within the embedding complexity." At another time, "virtuosity impresses in part because it seems more than human. And of course it is not." The taxonomic fluidity here reveals just how difficult it can be to write about acting without resorting to a bank of adjectival modifiers. Across forty-five chapters the term eventually seems to function as a celebratory call, like the evaluative cheer "bravo" from an audience member.

There are some remarkable moments in the book. Pomerance's discussion of Matt Damon's balletic shifts from stillness to movement as Jason Bourne opens an enlightening account of the emotional and corporeal contortions required of actors as action stars. The relationship between acting and audiences, in which an actor's history of characters always remains vibrant in the shadows of their present performance, are grist for Pomerance's poetic insights, like the claim that to watch a film is to be amidst a "collection of strangers wearing the masks of friends." These philosophical ruminations can be inviting and even contagious in

their lyricism. Thus, what is most interesting is less the idea of the virtuosic than Pomerance's own rather particular approach.

To be legible but captivating, actors must weave through the space of the familiar and the strange. On one hand an actor reflects dominant culturally constructed expressions of meaning, on the other they tilt those expressions to avoid cliché. The connections between politics, social currents, and acting technique are drawn out in *Beyond Method*, Scott Balcerzak's illuminating book on Stella Adler's teachings and masculinity on screen. Where Pomerance and Callahan breeze through films between sentences, Balcerzak's six chapters focus on Adler's teaching and a handful of performances by De Niro, Brando, Henry Winkler, and Mark Ruffalo. These accounts are buttressed by an analysis of transcripts from Adler's classes.

Balcerzak is at his most incisive when combining cultural criticism, close reading, and archival material; he pays particular attention to the labor of acting, examining Robert De Niro's script notations. De Niro's notes clarify how the actor constructed Travis Bickle by observing cabbies and wolves, all the while considering gender. For Balcerzak, this reflects Adler's stress on doable actions, the present tense, and a broader reckoning with research, which was to shape how actors understood the social situation a character lived in. Moving into a realm that might be unexpected, he praises Winkler's capacity to retool and expand on the expectations of Arthur "Fonzie" Fonzairelli in *Happy Days*. The power of this account is the attention to detail and the contextualization of cultural shifts within the classes and choices made by actors.

At the core of this book is a connection between acting education and social theory. Balcerzak claims that Adler's emphasis on the "sociological observation and social engagement" reveals a link between "acting instruction and the changing image of white maleness on screen." Thus, Adler and her students offer a new way to think about the changing conceptualizations of masculinity and sexuality in mid-twentieth-century America.

Balcerzak is interested in broad conditions of life in America, but, like all of the authors considered here, he is fascinated by the ways small moments make meaning. And so, what is significant in the stammers, the mumbles, the flickers of thought, and the grace of a walk? What defines the bounds of acting? In part the answer appears to be the enunciation that acting is happening. The evidence of labor, even as it is also concealed, constitutes something akin to what Pomerance calls the "virtuosic." Acting, like Marcel Duchamp's urinal, is what it is in part because it announces itself as such. Each of these books, in their best moments, helps us understand the amplitude of that announcement and find both the magic and labor in it.—Nicholas Forster

Make My Day:

Movie Culture in the Age of Reagan

by J. Hoberman. New York: The New Press, 2019. 397 pp. Hardcover: \$28.99

When the Movies Mattered:

The New Hollywood Revisited

Edited by Jonathan Kirshner and Jon Lewis. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 214 pp., illus. Paperback: \$19.95.

In April 1978, Afghanistan fell to a Soviet-backed coup. In February 1979, the Shah of Iran was overthrown and the country became the Islamic Republic. Around the same time, the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty was signed. Meanwhile, Pakistan's new leader, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, had his predecessor Zulfikar Ali Bhutto hanged. Come the autumn, as militants took fifty-two Americans hostage in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, President Carter covertly authorized aid to the anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan. In December, Brezhnev, fearful that Carter was bent on reinstating the Ottoman Empire, sent troops in.

Meanwhile, in a land far away, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Lawrence Kasdan were pounding the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* script into shape. At one point in the finished movie, Harrison Ford's Indiana Jones is being chased through an Egyptian souk when he comes up against a dervish the size of a minaret. Has he met his match? Not a bit of it. If Indy sags a little at the sight of the heavy's menacingly swirling scimitar, it's only out of boredom. A second later, he affectlessly reaches for his Smith & Wesson pistol and blows the guy away. Great was the mirth in

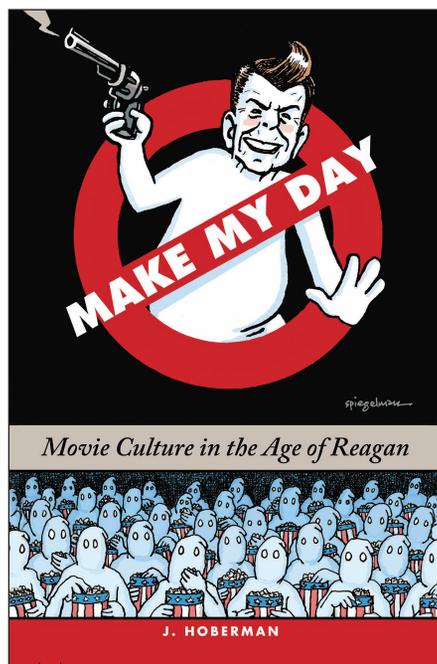
cinemas around the world—and so it should have been, Spielberg claimed in the picture's press notes. "The thing to keep in mind about this film," he said, "is that it is only a movie...[It is] not a statement of its times."

J. Hoberman is having none of this. The *Raiders'* creators might think they were doing nothing but serving up heroic hokum for the summer crowds. But for Hoberman Indiana Jones is "something else," something insidious and shaming: "a positive version of what would in the Sixties have been described as an Ugly American." So ugly that while the dust jacket of *Make My Day: Movie Culture in the Age of Reagan* features an Art Spiegelman cartoon of a gun-totin' fortieth president, the book's real villains are the men Hoberman holds responsible for the wrecking of the art form he loves: Spielberg and Lucas, Arnie and Sly.

Make My Day is the final part of a trilogy on what Hoberman calls "Cold War cinema." Read slightly out of order of publication (Hoberman's first volume, *The Dream Life*, deals with the Sixties, while its successor, *Army of Phantoms*, moves back to the Fifties), the three books offer an examination of postwar America that both complements and contrasts with the story told in John Updike's *Rabbit* tetralogy. No, you don't get Updike's granular illuminations of the tones and textures of the time. On the other hand, Hoberman has complete mastery of the sociopolitical lineaments of the age. Updike tells you how it felt to be alive from the Fifties through the Nineties. Hoberman tells you how the movies wanted you to feel about that period.

Not that his account is exhaustive. While Hoberman's eye misses little on the political front, his gaze is rather narrower when it comes to cinema. He has a case to make, and movies that don't speak up for it aren't called to the witness stand. So, in the present volume, we get *Jaws*, *Star Wars*, and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, as well as the various *Back to the Future* films. But *Fatal Attraction* is the only picture from the Eighties neo noir sex thriller subgenre that rates a mention. There's no *Jagged Edge*, no *The Morning After*, no *Against All Odds*. Fair enough, though can a book about Hollywood in the Seventies and Eighties that omits any mention of Jeff Bridges really be said to make sense? Nor is Hoberman much of a practical critic. The one film that occasions a qualitative judgment from him is *Ghostbusters*, in which, Hoberman argues, Bill Murray is "the only strong lead." That's as may be, but *Make My Day* would be an even better book than it is had it found room to acknowledge that movies can be more than just their ideological underpinnings.

Not that Hoberman is reductive. He might have called an earlier collection of his criticism *Vulgar Modernism*, but you will seek the Cold War trilogy in vain for even a taint of unreconstructed Marxism. For Hoberman, movies aren't—or aren't only—reflections of



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