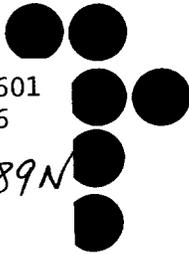


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THE CULTURE OF CELEBRITY:
MODERN MEDIA AND IDEAS OF FAME

October 5, 1989

Seminar Notes

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James Naremore, Indiana University
Leo Braudy, University of Southern California
David Thorburn, M.I.T. (session moderator)
Antonio J. Botelho, Rapporteur

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Professor David Thorburn opened the session with a brief introduction. He mentioned that both speakers, James Naremore and Leo Braudy, belong to a special class of cultural critics. After doing distinguished traditional literary research both turned to film study relatively early in their careers.

The first speaker, James Naremore, professor of English and director of film studies at Indiana University. Naremore has recently published books on Virginia Woolf, Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, and most recently, Acting in the Cinema, from which he will draw in his talk today.

Professor Naremore, commented that he was pleased to be speaking in the presence of Leo Braudy, whose writing on film had influenced his own work.

Naremore began by saying that for over one hundred years we have been observing human behavior through what Dziga Vertov called the "kino eye", a mechanical extension of our vision. From serial photography to contemporary television, technological devices have given us images that magnify, isolate, analyze and interpret the body and the face in action. Undoubtedly, our consciousness, our cognition, our way of seeing has been affected by this process. Acting, or the theatrical "presentation of self" has also been transformed, although the precise nature of this change is difficult to pin down. He went on to say that he finds only

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two essential differences between acting in the media and acting on stage, and neither of them have anything to do to do with expressive technique per se.

First, Naremore observed, acting in the cinema (and television) is different from acting on the stage because the existential bond between the performer and the audience is broken. The two groups that constitute a theatrical event, the performer and the audience, are not present to one another; they cannot momentarily change places, and the performance is not affected by the behavior of the group watching.

Second, he continued, the cinema is capable of synthetically reconstructing images of the body. Film is the only medium in which it is not only possible but normal to have multiple actors portray a single role. The result of these two features of cinema, he remarked, is that even though the actors' bodies are seen in much more detail, they are not actually present. They have been transformed into what Jean Baudrillard would call "simulacra."

He then went on to address the more narrow, albeit complex, problem of film acting as an art form in the 20th century. Does film acting require skills and modes of behavior that are relatively different from theater? To what extent does it comprise a specific art determined in some way by technology? As an answer, Naremore began by saying that we first have to look briefly at the history of acting. He said that

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Hollywood press has often described movie actors as if they were merely presences like found objects or dada art. As a result we have the famous (and apocryphal) story of Lana Turner, who was supposedly discovered in a soda shop wearing a sweater. We may doubt such myths, he continued, but we know that behavior on the screen can be manipulated by editors and photographers. In fact, no less an authority than Alfred Hitchcock once described good movie acting as "doing nothing extremely well." Indeed, some of the most striking performances in the history of the medium have been accomplished by animals, infants, and amateurs.

Despite all this film acting usually requires a specialized skill. Most of the classic stars were formally trained in the theater. Naremore remarked that during a crucial period between 1850 and 1915, when the industry was creating a director-centered mode of production, a feature-length format, and a star system, many of the key personalities in movies were enlisted from the ranks of stage performers. D. W. Griffith and Lillian Gish, for example, were deeply familiar with theatrical techniques and they helped create the behavioral language of silent film by adapting an old art to a new medium. Naremore then said that when movies began to talk, a second wave of theatrical personnel came to Hollywood. Rouben Mamoulian, George Cukor and other Broadway directors began their film making careers during this period, as did theatrically trained actors like Humphrey Bogart, Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy. For a brief time in the 1920s, Lev Kuleshov and the Soviet avant-garde tried to devise a cinema-specific style of performance based partly on the

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jerky, hyperbolic look of American silent comedies and melodramas. In general, however, film acting has always been guided by developments on the stage.

Naremore then stated that the behavior of people on the screen seems to be influenced less by technology than by broader kinds of cultural development that were felt first on the stage and then in the cinema. In this regard, he noted, it is interesting that the movies became a popular art form during a period when theatrical acting was undergoing a significant change. For several hundred years, in a process that we can trace all the way back to the beginning of Western theatre, actors were trained in what came to be known in the 19th century as the "pantomime" tradition. This term does not refer to silent performers, although we have a tendency to think of silent movies when we think about pantomime. It refers instead to the mastery of standardized melodramatic poses and expressive gestures.

Naremore went on to speak of a series of "pantomime" textbooks on acting produced in the 19th century, the most famous in English being Henry Siddon's A Practical Illustration of Rhetorical Gesture and Action, and Gustave Garcia's Actors Art, both published in 1882. These books, he said, offer a series of illustrations of poses and facial expressions which the actor is expected to master. This was later known in some acting circles as the "cookbook" tradition of acting.

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He then showed some illustrations from books, that were influential on American actors at the turn of the century. A first set of illustrations came from a book by Edmond Shaftsbury titled Lessons in the Art of Acting, published in 1889. The popularity and pervasiveness of these books can be traced back to the work of a Parisian elocutionist named François Delasarte, who was interested in what he called the "semiotic" function of gesture (In fact he used the word semiotic before writers like Pierce or Saussure). Naremore also showed illustrations from a Charles Aubert's book, The Art of Pantomime, published in the US in 1927, long after pantomime had been abandoned on the stage. Here the "semiotic" is more complex. He observed that Aubert seemed to be addressing his book to aspiring actors in silent movies. He also noted that Aubert's book included "close up" of facial expressions as well as bodily poses.

He stated that by the time this book was written the pantomime tradition was practically gone. Between the 1880s and the 1920s -- under the influence of psychologists like Freud and Bergson, playwrights like Ibsen and Shaw, and directors like Stanislavski -- psychological realism had become the dominant form in the theatre. During this period acting grew less "stagy," and players learned a variety of techniques to convey so-called "inner" emotions. Acting moved from semiotics to psychoanalysis in this period. D. W. Griffith, he noted, was aware of this trend. In fact he had acted Ibsen on the stage, and when he came to the movies he tried to impart what was current in the theatre, advocating what he

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called "the values of deliberation and repose." Griffith's vivid close-ups required naturalistic acting techniques. But at the same time he was also directing silent melodramas, and despite his theoretical commitment to realism, his actors necessarily relied on the tradition of pantomime. In much the same fashion, Charlie Chaplin's major films employed both stylized body language and psychologically realistic close ups, as if the media was now split between two acting practices: on the one hand a newly-emergent naturalism, and on the other hand, the more traditional form of pantomime.

Naremore then remarked that with the advent of talkies the situation changed completely. He proceeded to say that by the early 1930s Hollywood was fully committed to a low-key, virtually invisible acting technique. Movies immediately borrowed established devices from realistic theatre, such as overlapping dialogue, and learned to avoid players with voices from the old fashioned elocutionist school. Meanwhile, teachers of acting, particularly in the United States, began to pay less attention to the body and more attention to the psyche. One might think that because of all this actors abandoned pantomime, but this is not exactly the case. In fact, he said, if you look at images from Aubert's book and compare with images from classic studio movies, you can see that the actor might well have been deciding how to do this close up by internalizing a familiar gestural "vocabulary." If under the stylized expression of Joan Fontaine in *Suspicion* we were to put a little caption, "Oh it will drive me mad!", we would have something

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similar to the old tradition of books on pantomime. Movies that were done in montage form particularly encouraged this technique. Think of the shower scene in Psycho or the scene of Cary Grant being chased by the airplane in North by Northwest. In such cases, the actor has to register a conventional facial expression in a brief time, indicating a specific emotion. Thus Peter Lorre once described the task of movie actors as "facemaking."

Naremore then asserted that what has happened in 20th century performance in the movies is that instead of relying on the old books for a codified set of gesture, the actor relies more on an ideolectic. He then gave two closeups of James Stewart, one from Rear Window and one from Vertigo. Whenever Stewart wants to express anguish he immediately raises his hands to his mouth and bites his knuckles. According to Naremore, there is a kind of repertoire of gestures that each actor internalizes. In fact, we could make up a book like Aubert's for contemporary actors, discovering many conventionalized poses and gestures.

But acting is not taught in that fashion today. Not surprisingly, Stanislavski exerted a strong influence on movies, and continues to do so. Many of America's greatest stars, from May Marsh to Gary Cooper, could be described as intuitive Stanislavskians. He proceeded to say that because people on the screen are tightly framed and magnified, film acting often involves what Stanislavski calls "gestureless moments."

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Players frequently convey emotions to us in movies with some small movement of eyes, using some form of "affective memory" to make their portrayal effective. By the same token the movies give special emphasis to what Naremore calls the "biological" dimension of performance. Robert de Niro's fatness in *Raging Bull* is an obvious example. But he asked us to also consider also how the movies have made us aware of many other, involuntary forms of biological expression. Movies frequently explore natural signs of aging on the faces of stars and in many instances players have relied on bodily symptoms such as blushing or visibly pulsating blood vessels to convince us that they are "living the part."

Naremore went on to say that in the period after World War II, Elia Kazan in the Actors Studio helped to make this tendency more overt. Lee Strasberg became the moderator of the Actor's Studio and his version of Stanislavski system, dating back to experiments of the Group Theatre in the 1930s, was widely associated with the remarkable movie performances of Montgomery Clift, James Dean and Marlon Brando. In the 1950s a new type of brooding, slightly rebellious, male star was born and Strasberg became a guru for a generation of American actors. Unfortunately, Strasberg's method consisted largely of "inner work" on the actor and it turned theatrical training into a kind of psychological therapy. The Actor's Studio contributed to a powerful strain of social realism in the cinema and helped to divert performances from elitist paths. At the same time the Actor's Studio fed the star system and its ideas were

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incorporated into mainstream Hollywood practice. It cannot be regarded as radical or revolutionary practice, and it derives once again from theatre. The Method devalued acting in the comic or deconstructive mode, unwittingly reinforcing the popular notion that actors somehow are the role they play.

Naremore concluded that we should certainly have to recognize the achievements of Strasberg, whose students included people like Jack Nicholson, Al Pacino and Jane Fonda. But we ought to be careful not to identify naturalism with good movie performances. Other approaches, he remarked, are no less cinematic and are equally deserving a study.

He commented that probably the last flowering of pantomime in the movies was the German silent cinema. For example, one can find pantomime acting in scenes of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, but the style here comes not from the 19th century "cookbook" tradition, but from German expressionist theatre. This sort of thing has not disappeared completely; it has been revived brilliantly by performers such as Robert Mitchum in *Night of the Hunter*, where Mitchum draws on the old Delsartian tradition of theatrical rhetoric to play a demented Southern preacher.

He remarked that comic acting also has a much older tradition, derived from circus, from vaudeville, and from a long history of clowning on the stage. It is like the semiotic tradition. Thus the best movie

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comedians -- from Buster Keaton to Cary Grant, and from Mae West to Steve Martin -- have possessed physical skill and the ability to peek slightly through their roles.

In this regard, he noted that radical and avant-garde performance takes the comic a process a step further, often driving a visible wedge between the performer and the character. The great theorist of such technique, he said, is Bertolt Brecht, whose ideas for the theatre have had an important impact on cinema, most notably on the films of Jean-Luc Godard. Nevertheless, film actors cannot directly adopt the methods of Brecht, for the simple reason that movies are a form of mechanical reproduction. In cinema, as he mentioned before, the existential bond between the performer and the audience is broken and the actor becomes an imaginary signifier projected on the screen. As Brecht himself recognized, movies turn the audience into more or less isolated dreamers. Films have enormous publics but they always set up a barrier analogous to the fourth wall of naturalistic theater. In this circumstance a performer can never collaborate with an audience to transform the world. She or he is just an image, a part of the generalized economy of signs.

The following speaker, Leo Braudy, Leo Bing Professor of Literature at the University of Southern California, has taught at Yale and Columbia, and is the author of a number of books on cultural history, literary

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study and film study. His most recent book is a history of ideas of fame, The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History.

Professor Braudy began by saying that fame is everywhere, we talk about it so much that we think it is a twentieth century invention. But, he argued, that from his historical training he can tell that fame is not so new. During the 18th century, for instance, everybody talked about fame as transcendental.

The 18th century standard for fame is Rome, they talk about Cicero, Caesar. Following this trail of history, he continued, you can find that the Romans always talked about Alexander the Great, where we can locate the genesis of our own idea of fame.

The basic armature of his book, Braudy said, is the contrast between the classical fame, Greek attitudes toward fame as they are codified in Rome, and on the other hand Christian, or Judeo-Christian attitudes towards fame as codified by the Church fathers.

In the classical Greek attitude, he explained, fame is immediate public performance. Specifically in our modern terms that of the general, of the politician, of the order. What the Romans really do to this attitude is to create an engineered public life, a society that is pervaded by worrying about, preoccupied about what does it mean to be in public. Romans invented public schools, that is the idea of public

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learning as opposed to tutorial learning on a one to one kind of learning.

On the other hand the Judeo-Christian attitude, particularly more Christian than Judaic defines itself in opposition to Roman values. The crucial difference is in what a person is. What a person is, what is the reality of a person, in the Roman sense is situated in the way we come off to other people, how we impress other people. In the Christian sense, of course, it is the soul. Replacing the immediate audience of other people is, of course, the audience of god.

In fact, Braudy emphasized, if other people approve you, usually means that you are a bad Christian, that is your action has to impress God not others. This comes up again in different forms later in the history of fame. One of the more intriguing 19th century variations is the idea of avant-garde. That is the artist does not want to be commercially successful, because that means that he is merely commercially successful, that means that his art is merely a commodity. As early Christians looked to God as audience the avant-garde artist looks to posterity as his audience. He will be only justified by the future. A secularization of that attitude they are both looking out to an invisible audience. Now, he said within the history of western culture these two basic attitudes, the immediate audience versus the invisible audience, the physical self versus the invisible soul, are mediated by art. The artistic object of an artist in the Renaissance taps into

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invisibility, into spiritual pathways that are not based on physical.

The next and perhaps most crucial step for our own period occurs in the late 18th century. The French and American revolutions caused the democratization of fame. The democratization of fame changes the kind of society, and the kind of political culture, and therefore the kind of fame to which people aspire.

There seem to be three basic elements to look for in the history of fame in any given period. One is the available media. It is different having your image stamped on a coin from a performance on television. The second, it is the political system. Fame in a monarchy is very different from fame in a democracy. Fame in a monarchy is based on a pyramidal structure at which at the top is the king, and one cannot get past him, or can never become the king. The top is never available to you. But fame in a democracy, in contrast, has many peaks of ambition, many possibilities. And so many possible modes of aspiration.

The third element is the idea of what a culture believes a perfect person is, not necessarily in terms of status, but in terms of perfection. In the Christian culture, the most perfect, pure person is someone whose spirituality has been expressed. This would not be true in a Roman culture. In the democratic revolutions the two elements, the classical and the christian, the spiritual and the physical in the idea of performance come together. A bit in France, even more saliently in

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the United States. Because the United States is the political culture that was created on purpose. Everything is premeditated. The symbols are all premeditated. Part of that historical background is responsible for the way we are constantly renegotiating our basic symbols, renegotiating what it means to be an American. The sense of "americaness" partakes of both the immediate and the spiritual. He further said that this was what happens to fame as it happens to the whole idea of public nature in America. This American notion of fame, in contrast with the history of fame in which there was a crucial opposition between the Roman physical element and the Christian spiritual element, crosses overs so that physicality, physical fame, in America itself becomes a spiritual category.

Here, he said he wished to crossover a bit to the idea of the actor. Certainly, in European cultures, and in Western culture in general up until the 19th century the actor is generally viewed as a negative figure, and particularly a figure that appeals to darker instincts in people. For Christians at that time, he elaborated, the more fame a writer a polemicist might have the more negative he is. He then offered a quotation from a late 17th century bishop on this topic. This he said, is a Catholic French attitude but it is very comparable to English puritan attitudes in 17th century. The puritan lack of interest in the psychology of acting, the idea that role play is a sham in some way and the idea that someone who plays a role well is a hypocrite. He went on to elaborate that there is something about acting, hypocrite is in fact

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the greek word for actor, that raises the questions of hypocrisy in these early years of modern theatre.

Braudy then said that the negative idea about acting that Christian polemicists had yet in America becomes positive. The bitterest opposition to theatre prospers when theatre becomes popular, when performance becomes more important as a way of surviving in society, as a way of defining yourself in society. American fascination with performers crosses the spiritual and the political in this way and follows that conflict almost to the latter. For Americans, he continued, the spiritual and the political are coordinate realms. America itself as a political economy has a spiritual sanction, so public men, actors and performers should have that same kind of spiritual sanction. We want spirituality to exist in public. The TV evangelist is just one example of this. Spiritually public but physically private, the categories have been turned around. We all know the category of the shy movie star who will take off her clothes in front of the camera but will not sign an autograph. The film, the visible presentation of people who are not there, allows a kind of self-exposure if we define the self as the physical body.

This attitude towards fame is a paradox. In support he made two 19th century quotations. The first by Emily Dickson, said that "To earn it by disdaining it is fame consummate fee". He elaborated that the whole style of Emily Dickson of ostentatiously turning away from fame and

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publication is very much in accord with the whole style of avant-garde described before.

He then quoted Disraeli, "The more you are talked about the less powerful you are". He elaborated that, if you think about Disraeli's words in terms of 20th century history, it is no longer true. Deep in our hearts we think that the more we are talked about the more powerful you are. That is true particularly of people who want things economically.

He went on to say that American democratic theatre is how we can call this whole attitude. The spiritually self-made person who needs an audience. That person who says "I am unprecedented, I am unique, I am original and I want you to appreciate that". He advanced that it is his belief that this is a combination of the pushing forward and the hanging back so characteristically American. The speculator is someone who can bind the utmost materiality with the visionary, once again performing that crossover of categories. He then said that P. T. Barnum in the 19th century would create illusions, but what is really interesting about Barnum is not that he is a con man. The real Barnum would tell people "I'm gonna fool you. Here's how I'm gonna fool you. And now I'm gonna fool you. And do you understand how I fooled you?" That is part of democratic theory as well, there is a conspiracy between the public performer and the audience. Let's get together and be fooled about this. And your freedom is that you know about it. This suggests a

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distinction between political fame figures in democratic and totalitarian societies in the 20th century. The democratic fame figure supports the fame of the audience, and has a kind of self-irony about himself or herself, "Well I'm just here as your representative, I'm not really special in any way. Now, the totalitarian fame figure is one in contrast who embodies the fame of the audience and thereby replaces it, vest your desires for fame in me. He cited as examples FDR and Hitler, respectively.

In this regard, he stressed that one of the issues he was trying to develop is what does public performance mean politically in a mass society. FDR's performance is ironic where Hitler is totally serious. The democratic performer implicitly praises the audience, while the totalitarian performer somehow walks forward with the audience behind him.

He went on to say that another characteristic of fame in the 20th century that is connected with the above is that fame requires a necessary illusion of historical connection. That is, no important famous people in the past said they came out of nowhere. They were always connected in one way or another with somebody before who was exactly like them. In Greek mythology the hero is always connected to a predecessor. Yet in the 19th and 20th centuries a certain element in the history of fame becomes more important and that is the illusion of being unprecedented, the illusion of being ahistorical. He emphasizes

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that once again there is a paradox. On the one hand, I come from the past, I am the most recent embodiment of all the great figures you know already, on the other hand I'm just me, I gotta be me. These are elements that necessarily go together. Because one is the historical one, once again the kind of Roman and classical idea of precedence, of physicality of there being a genealogy of historical figures; and the other the spiritual element of not being in touch with other human beings at all but being in touch with the cosmos, being in touch with the future, being in touch with God, being in touch with the intangible in that same way.

He summarized by saying that all these paradoxes that he has been looking at our present moment have gotten more and more complicated, because they are very vital to the kind of problems we are facing now in an overburdened with both information and people. With the increase in information and the increase in population that the whole relation of what is individual in us and what is general in us has become even more crucial issue. He stressed that is a fame issue. Because, it is exactly the problem of fame. It is the doubleness of the assertion of the historical connection and the assertion of being unprecedented are inseparable elements of the public person now. And its companion problem, what is public and what is private. One has only to look at most of Washington's recent scandal's. Public performance is a common language in a country that has very little in common except for the fact we all consider ourselves Americans. We all potentially focus on all

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the same public figures. It is intriguing that Gorbachev and the Russians think that is the way out, importing some sense of performance-oriented individuality from America. United States and Russia are the first great successes in what I would call internal imperialism. The United States with political democracy and Russia with economic democracy. They consolidated their internal structures, their governmental structures, their national structures through a shared moral/spiritual point of view. Probably on the model of Napoleonic France, but they take it a lot further. One of the ways the United States has used to take it a lot further is through the movies, through the use of the media to cast on a giant screen new paradoxes of performance and political nature.

Braudy concluded asking the question where this all going to go? He answered that he is not certain whether it will be the end of fame or of a certain tradition of fame. He said that there is a lot of ambivalence, people are getting a little more sensitive. It certainly points out to the victory of the western idea of the individual as a cultural unit. As a culture figure defined particularly by an ambivalence about the issues mentioned above. An ambivalence of the identity that is vested in the physical versus an identity invested in the spiritual. An ambivalence of what constitutes one's private life and what constitutes one's public life , what constitutes oneself when one is alone and what constitutes oneself when one is with others.

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He suggested that because of the movies, because of television, because of the experience of being intimate with people who are not there, that Americans are particularly suited to turn this ambivalence, this paradox, into synthesis.

The first comment from the audience was made by a stage actress, who raised the issue of the strangeness of working with video, the movies. She suggested that there was a feeling of not being in command anymore. Professor Braudy said that it is very much in accord with the idea that there are different models with different master professions. Now the model is being a performer, the standard. Thus the kind of fragmentation mentioned in the making of video or film is very characteristic of our fragmented, running about, social life, because of increased popularity, increased media.

The next question, addressed to Professor Braudy, asked for clarification about the concepts of cultural democracy and mass society because the two seem to be contradictory in a way, given the Reagan experience. Braudy replied that Reagan's historical reference was Roosevelt. He went on to say that Reagan was not totalitarian because nobody followed, he did not do most of what he promised. He said that he believed that Reagan more than Kennedy is a real television person. He emphasized that there is a not necessarily positive soothing side of

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cultural democracy. Reagan was elected because he was perceived as a nice guy. He argued that Reagan's popularity continues to be high because of the illusion he performs, just like P.T. Barnum, and everybody knows about it.

The next comment was about star acting. Professor Naremore in this regard said that there appears to be a performance within the performance going on which allows the star system to work. For example, Katherine Hepburn is always thrust into performances where her stage and athletic past are brought forward. The star's performance is structured around the discourse about the star that the audience is aware of, an old tradition in the theatre.

In response of a related comment for further explanations on gestural tradition and the star system, Naremore indicated that gestural tradition involves some kind of an expressive language that involves meanings in gender, social class, ethnicity; we are still using socially codified ways of behaving. We do not need the textbooks anymore because we see them so much more in the form of images. Braudy added that one can also associate it with letting the audience in, linking the audience to the figure of the great performer. The body becomes intertextual in a way, he concluded.

The following question asked that given the fact that in political life political figures seem to look for famous figures, what affect does it

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have on political life. Braudy responded by saying that it has to do with the power of celebrity. He said that Europeans are still fond of making condescending remarks about American culture by pointing to Reagan's presidency as the presidency of an actor, whereas Europeans have professors and intellectuals running their society. Naremore confessed incapable of saying what would happen in the future but said he found the question intriguing because it goes to the heart of matters of authority. That is how a society confers authority on a performer. Who has the right to speak and whose words will be taken most seriously. Braudy returned to the question by saying that until fairly recently for an actor to have a political opinion was considered to be ridiculous. Whenever they did appear it was the political arm that decided who should speak. He made an analogy with the way that kings and potentates crowded around Lindbergh after his flight, the spiritually famous performer. Politicians think that actors have some magic to fame and wish to move into that. What happens now is that actors and all sorts of people are having all kinds of opinions, and that has a complex impact on their constituencies.

The next comment interpreted Braudy's talks as saying that celebrity itself is becoming so democratized that everyone has a chance of being on a talk show and we now even have celebrities who are famous for nothing other than the fact they are celebrities! That may be a distinctive feature of contemporary culture. It was argued that television may be leading in this way. And television proliferates so

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many celebrities that are forgotten by the next season.

Naremore responded that these ideas get talked in the media itself, suggesting there is a kind of ironic postmodern culture, exemplified in movies like *The King of Comedy*. Or even a film like *Robocop* which is about the anxiety of being human, are we real human beings or are we simulacra? He suggested that a lot of this is a kind of human nostalgia for a past when humans were humans, a past that never existed. Perhaps what the technology is teaching us is that to be human is to be engaged in some kind of sign system. Braudy added on that, that he thought that science fiction and horror in particular face this issue maybe more directly than other media, but is reflected elsewhere. For example, think how strange it is Barbara Walters to ask Johnny Carson: What is Johnny Carson really like?

The next question inquired if we are not overestimating the commercial system. Naremore said that the argument implied in the question reminded him of a famous essay on postmodernism which argues that this new modern of production flattens out any sense of history and cultivates this permanent sense of irony. Naremore said that he is not really in agreement with that argument because it also echoes one of the oldest arguments about mass culture that goes back to the Frankfurt school in the 1920s, particularly people of Adorno who were afraid of mass manipulated one-dimensional culture that was going to turn us all into zombies. But when I look back at the period Adorno's ideas became

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famous, I find a very rich popular culture going on.

Braudy added that we see our culture so undifferentiated because we are in it, once we start looking into the past we see a lot more. He said that he was also very dubious about the commercial market. He said that studios cannot really read what is going on with any degree of accuracy, that is why there are sequels.

The next questioner asked why neither speaker had discussed the way a "male gaze" was inscribed in films and television. Naremore said that the question was not directly related to the topic. The original feminist argument saw the camera as a male spectator, leaving no space for women to be total actors, as opposed to passive objects of display. He then cited his own juggling when writing about Dietrich. He conclude that it is not as simple as male/gays, there are also female/gays, but that cinema was built around patriarchal conventions.

Braudy added that there is a difference between a movie and "the movies". A movie ends, on the other hand Dietrich as a performer continues and has a reality that is different from the reality she creates in any given movie. The performer has a reality that may be finally squeezed by the director, by the patriarchal discourse, or the shape of the film or the plot. But yet, there is the power of the performer that breaks out of the form.

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The next questioner asked if given that the terms used by Braudy to talk about fame, physicality, spirituality, have gender values, to tell the story of fame taking gender into account wouldn't he have to tell the history in a different way. Braudy said it agrees and that he explains in the book that he is telling a male history of fame. But he added, that in fact he thinks that one of the things that has broken down, and that perhaps the movies should take the credit for. By the end of the 19th century you start having a almost complete disintegration of the male fame line and the raising of alternate forms of fame.

The final question asked if we do not have to discuss the culture of fame as a phenomenon of 20th century life, as the celebrity has. Braudy said that it is the fan who differentiates first and the critic later. Naremore, partially disagreeing, said that he did not agree with the power of the fan. He said that he does not believe that the power of the fan is the same as of the people who made Dallas. And that we have to recognize that Dallas is about a fascist patriarchal society. Braudy concluded by saying that so much of the analysis is about structures, it is more politically useful to look at the subversions, the potentials for subversions.