

The Act of Suffering: Intense Performances in Contemporary American Cinema

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis proposes a study of dramatic film performance in contemporary US cinema through the lens of intensity. Many famed performances in American film history are noted for their intensity achieved through the actor's commitment to a level of real suffering. "The Act of Suffering" seeks to unpack the history of the association between suffering and dramatic performance. Each case study in this thesis concerns an actor whose legacy, through the media coverage of their career, has been defined by the intensity of their performances that is framed as resulting from their unique level of artistic commitment. The first chapter on Gena Rowlands in *Opening Night* (1977) calls for a renewed focus on the actor's work and argues that her intense performance of a troubled actress emerges from her own working methods and is further developed in collaboration with the cast and crew. The second chapter compares Robert De Niro and Daniel Day-Lewis in the *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Gangs of New York* (2002) respectively, and argues that their efforts to fully inhabit their historical characters are rooted in a desire to legitimize the labour of performance and distance themselves from their star image. The third chapter on Viola Davis in *Fences* (2016) and *Widows* (2018) argues that her balance of strength, vulnerability, and intensity contributes to the growth of opportunities for authentic Black female narratives in Hollywood. Through these analyses, this thesis aims to trace the history of how intensity has become a production value in contemporary US cinema.

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Introduction Acting Matters

Actors are crucial contributors to the narrative filmmaking process. They are the conduits of story and meaning, as well as creators of meaning in their own right. In some instances, what can be characterized as a great dramatic performance is expected to come from a process of physical and psychological suffering. This expectation is then used by actors and their directors to craft performances where intense emotion and reaction seem to be actually felt rather than simply reproduced. Media attention and publicity consistently highlight and even fetishize the immense strain many actors will go through for their art, thereby furthering the belief that “great art” comes from suffering.

Intense performances are at the core of an important lineage in American cinema, associated with a variety of cinematic contexts and modes of production. These types of performances have become a production value which is then made use of around the release of the film, and particularly during awards campaigns. In some cases, intensity and the perception of real suffering in performance becomes associated with a specific actor, constituting an underlying narrative in the construction of their celebrity persona and the furthering of their acting careers.

This thesis will focus on four actors and the films that epitomize their association with intensity. These case studies, spanning from the 1970s to the 2010s, offer variations on the narrative of the “intense performance” as a creative and promotional vehicle for film performers, and reflect how this promotional discourse has changed in the cinematic industry and in the media landscape. Intensity here refers to strong emotionality or physical commitment and is linked to a goal or perception of earnestness and passion going beyond the average, more subdued dramatic performance. Each film star is one who has often been recognized and praised for their psychological and physical intensity, not only in their final performance but in their creation processes as well: Gena Rowlands in *Opening Night* (1977), Robert De Niro in *Raging Bull* (1980), Daniel Day-Lewis in *Gangs of New York* (2002), and Viola Davis in *Fences* (2016) and *Widows* (2018). In analyzing the promotion and reception of the actors and their performances in the named films as representative of their intense approaches to acting, this thesis will address the following question: how does acting as a form of discourse involve suffering, labour, and the production of intensity that is conveyed in film culture?

In this thesis, I will examine intensity as an underlying discourse in the reception of film performance in contemporary US cinema, across different modes and contexts of production, from those originating and circulating in the independent circuit to different types of Hollywood films. This thesis considers the discourse around intensity in acting and stardom as it relates to differences in gender and race, as well as the actors' varying levels of engagement with film promotion and the media in general. These case studies will reflect distinctions in media expectation, production, and reception throughout eras and milieus of US cinema. They all share the commonality of stardom as it is defined by film scholar Christine Geraghty, who argues that a star should simultaneously be considered “as celebrity (private identity that becomes public, constructed largely outside film texts), as professional (public persona is indistinguishable from private

persona), and as performer (the public ‘work’ of the star on screen).”¹ To approach these case studies at the intersection of art, labour, and publicity, I will draw from a transdisciplinary structure of analysis including film history, cultural studies, and critical theory.

The following scholarly sources will form the basis of this thesis’s argumentative framework. Cynthia Baron’s *Modern Acting: The Lost Chapter of American Film and Theatre*, James Naremore’s *Acting in the Cinema*, and Shonni Enelow’s *Method Acting and Its Discontents*, all histories of film acting in an American context, are invaluable sources. Each of these authors are concerned with performances and performance styles of actors throughout various decades of American film, with specific focus on important eras and schools of acting which have come to define the parameters by which performance has been culturally received. Baron’s writing in particular will provide a foundation from which to disentangle the label of “Method acting” from each of these actors’ career narratives. These key sources will allow me to localize each case study in a time and mode of film production, and to take into consideration the context that fostered each performance. Richard Dyer’s writing on stardom, particularly in his book *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, is also particularly crucial, as he frames stars as media texts and popular icons idiosyncratically received by different audiences. His approach will serve as a model for me to show how intense acting in film serves to construct the social significance of an actor as a conveyer and catalyzer of social and cultural meanings, readings, and issues. In addition, Timothy Corrigan’s approach to auteur theory as outlined in his article “The Commerce of Auteurs: A Voice without Authority” will inform my approach to performance history, particularly in the first two chapters; Corrigan approaches auteur theory from the perspective of how it is used in a promotional sense and how it forms narratives from the careers of directors, which they then engage with differently. He identifies a generation of filmmakers that come of age in the post-Vietnam period, when New Hollywood cinema creates a new space for auteur/star filmmakers with a new type of agency made possible through promotional and direct links that they can establish with their audiences. I want to apply this view of auteurs to actors in the way that it has previously been applied solely to directors.

Lastly, I will also draw from biographies, profiles and interviews of the actors, academic articles about the actors and their performances, as well as contemporaneous reviews of the films they starred in, with an emphasis on the historical and cultural contexts they were published in that position intense acting as a production value. By comparing the ways in which writers and critics choose to frame actors’ careers, acting choices, and specific performances, I will be able to trace the reception of the intense performances I am studying, as well as how that intensity is understood to be shaping the industry. For example, I will be making use of Angelica Jade Bastien’s article “Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting,” which was published in 2016 and argues against a trend of acting techniques that relies on often volatile stunts. These primary and secondary sources will inform the critical analysis of these performers to demonstrate how they showcase the suffering and labour involved in acting.

This thesis concerns the way these films and the media coverage of them position intense acting as a production value and associate it with on- and off-screen elements related to the actor performing in the film. This portion of the analysis will especially underline how the media celebrates the performances of the actors featured in these films and will frame those performances

¹ Christine Geraghty, “Re-Examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold), 187–195.

as being indebted to an element of psychological and/or physical suffering at their core. To be sure, not all of these actors engage with the media in the same way, resulting in different approaches to narrativizing their acting methods and careers. Media coverage and interest in Rowlands's career, for instance, has been overshadowed by that of her frequent collaborator and husband, John Cassavetes, who directed many of the movies she is most known for, including *Opening Night*. Despite her openness to the media at various points in her career, her legacy as an actor is intrinsically tied to how her performances reflect Cassavetes's working methods. De Niro and Day-Lewis, on the other hand, are more averse to publicity, with Day-Lewis stating: "I avoid talking about the way I work. But in avoiding it I seem only to have encouraged people to focus their fantasies about me in an even more fantastical way."² Lastly, Davis is much more regularly interviewed and profiled than the other three have been throughout their careers. She is generally more engaged and vocal about issues of visibility and racism in the US film industry, which puts her in closer proximity to films that are constantly surrounded by publicity, and in fact use that publicity to their advantage to further the narratives of their stars' careers.

Secondly, this thesis will propose a gender-specific reading of how intense performance is constructed in contemporary US cinema, especially through the promotion and critical reception of actors as celebrities, as artists, and as mouthpieces for other people's stories. The fact that Gena Rowlands's most famous and celebrated performances are in her husband's films is crucial to the way those films are constructed, as well as the way she is then received as an actor. The myths around De Niro and Day-Lewis and the extreme measures they have taken to fully embody their characters can be argued as hinging on the fact that men are generally given much more leeway to be eccentric and "difficult" for the sake of their craft, with such instances becoming points of cultural fascination and encouraging similar stunts from other actors. The Hollywood and media discourse on Viola Davis's enduring excellence throughout her film and stage career as one of the few Black female stars within the predominantly white context of Hollywood will allow this thesis to tackle the discourse on intensity as a production value from an intersectional perspective.

The time periods in which these actors were most notable are vastly different, and historical contextualization creates an additional layer in how their gender and race has influenced the reception of their performances. The work done by Rowlands and De Niro in the 1970s and early 1980s takes place during the rise of American independent cinema, when boundaries were being pushed in many directions, including performance style. The method of the British-born and raised actor Day-Lewis will be contextualized within his career in American independent cinema since the early 1990s. De Niro and Day-Lewis serve as examples to other contemporary actors willing to push themselves to extreme lengths in the name of authenticity, and as the objects of never-ending and somewhat morbid fascination with the results. In such cases, extremity becomes a symbol of authenticity, and endurance a symbol of commitment to artistry. One major recent example of this is when Leonardo DiCaprio received overwhelmingly positive critical praise for his performance in Alejandro González Iñárritu's *The Revenant* (2015), a film with a notoriously grueling production that was heavily emphasized during its awards campaign. "I can name 30 or 40 sequences that were some of the most difficult things I've ever had to do," said the actor of the shoot. "Whether it's going in and out of frozen rivers, or sleeping in animal carcasses, or what I

² *The Telegraph*, "Daniel Day-Lewis aims for perfection, February 22, 2008, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1579473/Daniel-Day-Lewis-aims-for-perfection.html>.

ate on set. [I was] enduring freezing cold and possible hypothermia constantly.”³ DiCaprio went on to win an Academy Award for this performance, just as De Niro won for his own transformative and endurance-based performance in *Raging Bull* thirty-five years earlier.

At the opposite pole, Rowlands and Davis, as women, are in positions where they have long been typecast in roles requiring performances of intense suffering, such as that of the hysterical housewife or ‘difficult’ entertainer. Although the type of suffering and endurance expected of dramatic performances by female actors is usually more emotional and psychological, it is intimately tied to their experience (and the experience of their characters) as women in a misogynistic society, and can therefore often also involve a physical component; as is exclaimed by a male character in *Opening Night*, “Actresses get slapped, it’s a tradition.”⁴ In addition, Davis in particular has repeatedly performed in roles of long-suffering Black women in narratives that directly deal with issues of race and the intersection of race and gender. Following her rise to Hollywood stardom, she has been able to be engaged, both onscreen and off, in questions of representation for Black performers and narratives, and has been the face of milestones in that regard in the last decade. Her career is intrinsically tied to her race, and this includes the roles she is cast in, the shifting ways they are received, and the way this forms the overall narrative of her career. Each of these case studies will therefore represent contrasting ways in which intense performance has been framed and received, and how that has continued to shape the cultural conversation around intensity in acting.

A key component of this study is tracing “Method Acting” as it was initially developed as well as how it has changed as a term used in film culture since then. The Method, which can be attributed to Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio, refers to an acting technique through which the actor makes use of “affective memory and the substitution of [their] personal experience for characters’ circumstances and objectives.”⁵ Though directly indebted to the acting system developed by Konstantin Stanislavski, it differs considerably from that system, as well as from the techniques developed by other acting teachers who were students of Stanislavski, including Sanford Meisner and Stella Adler. The term “Method Acting” has, however, gone beyond referencing this specific acting technique. Shonni Enelow characterizes it as a complex component in the history of performance due to “its double history as an actual artistic practice and a generalized and inexact, but nonetheless vivid, figure in the cultural imaginary.”⁶ Indeed, “Method Acting” has come to stand in for any form of acting preparation or performance considered dramatically intense and therefore “truthful” enough to warrant the label.

Much work has gone into untangling various other acting techniques from the label of Method, particularly Cynthia Baron’s work on “Modern acting” as a contrasting and equally (if not more) widespread category of techniques, defined as being “designed to address the varied *acting problems* of building characterizations and developing the requisite concentration and physical ability to embody those characterizations, contrast with the Method’s more singular

³ Jordan Zakarin, “Leonardo DiCaprio on Fighting a Bear in ‘The Revenant’ and Film vs. TV,” *Yahoo*, October 19, 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/leonardo-dicaprio-on-fighting-a-1281529422913590.html>

⁴ *Opening Night*, directed by John Cassavetes (1977; New York: Criterion Collection, 2004), DVD.

⁵ Cynthia Baron & Sharon Marie Carnicke, “Capturing Natural Behavior on Film?” *Theatre Annual* 59: 96.

⁶ Shonni Enelow, *Method Acting and Its Discontents* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015): 5-6.

emphasis on addressing “the actor’s problem” to experience real feeling during performance.”⁷ The distinction is crucial because of how many actors have been mischaracterized as Method actors due to a fundamental misunderstanding of both the acting technique itself and the context of those performers’ working methods. This will be particularly relevant in the first two chapters, which focus on actors who have throughout their careers been erroneously labeled as Method actors.

The first chapter will consist of an analysis of Gena Rowlands’s work as the star of *Opening Night*, and more generally of her legacy as an actor and star. Rowlands’s performance as the character of Myrtle Gordon, a female actor struggling to connect to a part and clashing with her collaborators, directly tackles issues of gendered suffering in performance spaces. Since the films of John Cassavetes—many of which starring Rowlands—have been rediscovered and reappraised in the last decades, there has been a strong auteurist streak to how they have been discussed and analyzed, with Cassavetes’s process and insight taking precedent on other aspects of the films and their production histories. In the process, interest in Rowlands’s performances and working methods have been subsumed by a greater interest in the director’s career narrative, particularly since Cassavetes has since been considered as one of the founders of American Independent cinema, meaning films produced and often distributed independently, outside the Hollywood studio system. Indeed, there is very little written about Rowlands specifically, with most of it being included in writings on Cassavetes. The style of the director’s films, *Opening Night* included, is one that is very raw and in the moment, favouring hand-held cameras, long takes, and close ups on actors’ faces, all with the goal of spotlighting the performances. Consequently, criticism and analysis focused on Rowlands’s performance is often within the context of a larger discussion of Cassavetes’s oeuvre, following Timothy Corrigan’s description of auteurism: “to view a film as the product of an auteur means to read or to respond to it as an expressive organization that precedes and supersedes the historical fragmentations and subjective distortions that can take over the reception of even the most classically coded movie.”⁸ My goal in this chapter is to look beyond this expressive organization and to focus instead on what is being organized, namely Rowlands’s famously intense performance style and the methods she used to achieve it.

In the second chapter I will turn to a comparative analysis of Robert De Niro and Daniel Day-Lewis in two films by Martin Scorsese. By tracing the similarities and contrasts between their approaches to character research, the way they deal with the media, and the general interest in their seemingly overly intense working methods, I will be able to analyze how the discourse on intense performance has developed from the late 1970s to the early 2000s, and how it has in many ways remained the same. There has been a consistent level of fascination with the intricacies of how actors prepare for demanding roles, and how that preparation might then affect those actors on a physical and psychological level. There are several similarities between De Niro and Day-Lewis, the characters they portray in *Raging Bull* and *Gangs of New York* respectively, and the positions they occupy in the cultural landscape of American cinema during the heights of their careers; identifying these similarities will allow for a greater understanding of their important place in the history of film performance in US cinema. Indeed, they have often been placed within a lineage of intense performers in American film history, as Chris Murphy notes in an article on the legacy of the “Method”: “Day-Lewis’s approach to acting in the ’90s shifted the public’s perception of

⁷ Cynthia Baron, *Modern Acting: The Lost Chapter of American Film and Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), xxi.

⁸ Timothy Corrigan, “The Commerce of Auteurism: A Voice without Authority,” *New German Critique* no. 49 (Winter 1990), 46.

what Method acting was, just as De Niro's did when he took over the Method mantle from Brando."⁹ As in the case of Rowlands, the complexities of both actors' working methods have come to be flattened under the label of the Method. This chapter seeks to unpack those complexities and examine the reasoning behind them. De Niro and Day-Lewis's processes of performance building involve painstaking research and bodily transformation and aim for a complete disappearance into the character, despite their stardom. I argue that their all-consuming approach to acting seeks to legitimize performance itself, and that the media coverage of their methods alternately furthers and pushes back against that legitimization.

In the third and final chapter, I will proceed with an analysis of Viola Davis's career, focusing on Denzel Washington's *Fences* and Steve McQueen's *Widows*, while also touching other relevant entries into her filmography, such as *The Help* (2011), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (2020), and the ABC television show *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-2020). By examining her career more generally as well as situating it within a contemporary context, I will be able to touch on how intense performance manifests in a more intersectional milieu. Viola Davis's Blackness as it intersects with her womanhood is integral to how she navigates through Hollywood spaces and shapes her acting career, as well as how that career is received by the media. Furthermore, her Blackness informs her stardom and what she is able to accomplish with it, namely the advocacy for other Black women (in Hollywood and otherwise). I will argue that Davis's acting style combines strength, vulnerability, and emotional intensity, and as a result contributes to her the authenticity that is a central feature of her star persona.

The case studies considered follow the evolution of intense performance as it has been culturally defined and discussed from the 1970s to the present day in an American context, and from decidedly independent films like *Opening Night* to studio productions like *Widows*. Intensity in dramatic film performance has always been difficult to pin down, as it must strike a balance between poignancy and believability, running the risk of being considered in its reception as histrionic or overly theatrical. This is further complicated when any production context becomes publicized and, in many cases, becomes the dominant narrative surrounding a film performance; Henry Adam Svec asserts that "part of the pleasure we derive from a 'Method' performance comes from our presumed knowledge of how such a performer has prepared for a role, and such knowledge has come to audiences through a variety of media and cultural forms—including celebrity intertexts."¹⁰ As the cultural understanding of what a "Method" performance is or can be has continued to become more nebulous, this statement has proven to be true of any of intense star performance, and it is precisely the media and cultural forms that report on actors' working methods that organize the narratives involving suffering and the production of intensity in the labour of performance. This rather specific cultural phenomenon has deep roots that have been written about from similar perspectives, but not so much brought together in the way proposed in this thesis. Indeed, much of the writings on the links between suffering and performance have focused on theater or taken it for granted as something that is inherent to the labour of performance. More specific focus has been given to industry misogyny and racism, particular cinematic movements, and even specific cases of actors representing a link between suffering and artistry. This thesis will, on a broader scale, address the legacy of intense acting by comparing notable case

⁹ Chris Murphy, "What Is Method Acting, Anyway?" *Vanity Fair*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/03/what-is-method-acting-anyway>.

¹⁰ Henry Adam Svec, "'The purpose of these acting exercises': The Actor's Studio and the labours of celebrity," *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 3 (2010): 2.

studies from a transdisciplinary perspective, and to account for it as a long-standing issue in the changing landscape of the US film industry. By doing so, I seek to better understand the current landscape of American cinema as the language around acting has continued to shift and the practice of campaigning for prestigious film awards has intensified, with actors seeming to be caught in a constant game of one-upmanship and media outlets either questioning or reaffirming the link between intensity, suffering, and dramatic realism. An oft-quoted anecdote from the set of John Schlesinger's *Marathon Man* (1974) has it that Laurence Olivier, frustrated with his co-star Dustin Hoffman's insistence on depriving himself of sleep in order to play a sleep-deprived character, wondered why he simply did not just "try acting."¹¹ These contrasting understandings of acting as a form of labour encapsulate much of the cultural discourse surrounding it; though it would be inaccurate to describe the current state of the culture around American cinema as being wholly for or against such approaches to dramatic performance, it is certainly one in which it is being consistently discussed. To fully understand the phenomenon, I argue that it is important to look back into its history.

¹¹ Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 160.

Chapter One

“It’s Mandatory You Get Hit”



Fig.1 — Myrtle Gordon (Gena Rowlands) collapses onstage.

Shining a Spotlight

Gena Rowlands’s career is inextricably linked to that of her husband John Cassavetes. Her most celebrated performances are in films that he wrote and directed, and together they form one of the many actor-director pairs that have become touchstones in U.S. cinema. Rowlands’s performances in these films are raw and vibrant, with *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) and *Opening Night* (1977) standing out as masterful portrayals of women in crisis.¹² However, the critical and scholarly reading of the couple’s careers and legacies is somewhat uneven. They are both remembered for work they did apart from each other, but while Cassavetes’s individual work is remembered as that of a master, both as an actor and a director, Rowlands’s overall output as an actor has not received equivalent recognition. Though she receives praise for her performances as women pushed to emotional extremes, this is often tied back to Cassavetes’s skill as a director and her ability to work according to his methods, rather than being attributed to her own skills and acting techniques. Consequently, the staying power of Rowlands’s critical and public recognition inevitably pales in comparison to that of her husband’s, and her oeuvre does not hold the same weight as his. Furthermore, Rowlands’s career trajectory is often thought of in two distinct categories: the Cassavetes films, and everything else. Sheila O’Malley remarks on this in an article reflecting on the actor’s work, claiming that “her career is often associated solely with the seven

¹² Gena Rowlands stars in the following films directed by John Cassavetes: *A Child is Waiting* (1963), *Faces* (1968), *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971), *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), *Opening Night* (1977), *Gloria* (1980), and *Love Streams* (1984). She also makes brief appearances in *Shadows* (1959) and *Husbands* (1970).

films she made with her husband... but that's a mistake,"¹³ before listing some of her other notable works such as *Another Woman* (1988), *Night on Earth* (1991), and *The Notebook* (2004). Rowlands's career is viewed through the lens of her husband's career, particularly as interest in Cassavetes's body of work has risen following his death in 1989, but during their careers there was also the media's tendency to fuse their careers together, which Rowlands and Cassavetes were themselves conscious of. They often chose to give interviews separately, in order for them to be thought of as individuals.¹⁴ Indeed, the distinctiveness of Rowlands's and Cassavetes's experiences in the film industry eventually led to a film that was expressly about those experiences. *Opening Night* (1977) features Rowlands as an artist conscious of how she is perceived and fighting against industry expectations of her at every turn; her character desires not only to be perceived as an individual, but to then be taken seriously as she is. The film was largely self-financed and is the fifth feature collaboration between Rowlands and Cassavetes, drawing on material gleaned from their own experiences in the performing arts. The film was poorly received by American critics upon release and was not widely available, like most of Cassavetes's films, until years after his death. Since then, the film has been critically reappraised and is now considered to be one of his best works, in no small part due to Gena Rowlands's central performance as an actor pushed to the extreme.

Crucially, many critics and scholars would attribute the intensity of Rowlands's performance in films directed by Cassavetes to the filmmaker himself. Across his filmography, Cassavetes's actors are electric and spontaneous in a way that seems closer to real life than to movie acting, and this characteristic matches the unconventional and energetic quality of the filmmaker's style. Indeed, Cassavetes has a reputation as a founder of independent cinema in America, due to an idiosyncratic approach to filmmaking which, as Lisa Katzman writes, "articulated a formal retort to traditional Hollywood modes of filmmaking... with strong roots in ensemble theatrical acting, Cassavetes was more democratic in his refusal to privilege one actor over another in scene and shot composition."¹⁵ It is important to note that many of Cassavetes's films, including *Opening Night*, received middling reviews and were not seen by very many, until much later. Following the rising availability of his work in the early 2000s and the subsequent reappraisal of what had early been poorly received, Cassavetes's position in the American film canon slowly became more concrete. In the reappraisal of his oeuvre and the mythmaking that accompanies canonization, his position as an auteur and his contribution to his films have come to overshadow those of his collaborators.

Cassavetes's oeuvre and the performances within it are commonly associated with the rise of Method acting, which was emerging at that time in American theater and film. His treatment of the *mise-en-scène* is often discussed within the framework of auteurism as described by John Caughie: "auteurism shares certain basic assumptions: notably, that a film, though produced collectively, is most likely to be valuable when it is essentially the product of its director [...]; that in the presence of a director who is genuinely an artist (an auteur) a film is more than likely to be an expression of his individual personality."¹⁶ As a result, many film critics view Cassavetes as a filmmaker-auteur, artistically in control of most aspects of his films and especially of the *mise-en-*

¹³ Sheila O'Malley, "Gena Rowlands: A Life on Film," *RogerEbert.com*, November 23rd, 2015, <https://www.rogerebert.com/features/gena-rowlands-a-life-on-film>.

¹⁴ Charles Higham, "The Family That Films Together May Win Oscars Together," *New York Times*, April 6, 1975.

¹⁵ Lisa Katzman, "'Opening Night': Moment by Moment," *Film Comment* 25, no.3 (May-June 1989), 30.

¹⁶ John Caughie, *Theories of Authorship*, (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981): 9.

scène (which includes acting), both due to his own experience in front of the camera and his resistance to Hollywood studios leading way to his trailblazing career.¹⁷ The auteur-informed approach to Cassavetes's work thus tends to overshadow Rowlands's. She is a crucial, perhaps obvious component of the work, but has not been afforded the same kind of attention, despite the fact that Cassavetes's most celebrated works rest largely on her shoulders.

My objective in this chapter is to propose a revision of the critical reception of the films that Gena Rowlands made with Cassavetes, with a particular focus on *Opening Night*, and to develop a corrective version of a narrative that has put this actor in the shadow of her husband's work. My goal is to reframe the narrative by centering her, her labour, her contribution to the film's tone and text, and her authorship of her own performance. To do so, it is necessary to examine some of the myths about Rowlands's and Cassavetes's use of improvisation and Method acting, and to reconsider the positioning of Cassavetes as the sole auteur of *Opening Night*. The intense performance Rowlands gives in *Opening Night* is the result of a long and careful process of discovery of her character through individual script work, creative interaction with her co-stars, and a constant collective reworking of the script, made possible by a collaborative environment prioritized by the director. The performance at the heart of the film and its visceral naturalism are not achieved solely through her efforts and singular commitment to realism at all costs, nor through the director's controlled guidance, but rather through an ongoing collaborative process incorporating the multiple interacting and contrasting views of the performers.

To this effect, I will be elaborating upon the collaborative nature of performance creation in the making of *Opening Night* and explain how this creative process was affected by Rowlands's performance, and in turn how it affected her work. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how questions of affect shape the critical response to that performance. *Opening Night* is itself about performance, authenticity, collaboration (and lack thereof), and, crucially, about intense performance as a trajectory entailing artistic suffering. The film's frank and emotionally fraught depiction of what it looks like behind the scenes makes it easy for audiences to take the film at face value and assume the same of its production, particularly in a scene I will briefly analyze, in which Rowlands's character Myrtle refuses to be slapped onstage. The issue of the slap is where the film and my own position on the suffering performer converge. I will first establish how *Opening Night*'s production was organized around a democratic rather than hierarchical structure of performance-making. I will then get more specifically into what Rowlands's own style consisted of and, importantly, did not consist of; the association of her work in Cassavetes's films with both free improvisation and Method acting casts a shadow over the realities of her more methodical labour. Finally, I will turn to the critical reception of the film as well as a close textual analysis of the slap scene and of the film's climactic performance that the reviews primarily reacted to. I will respond to the pushback against *Opening Night*'s centralization of emotional overflow and the tendency to draw comparisons between Rowlands and the suffering actor that she portrays.

¹⁷ Alexander Ross, "The Actor Who Taught Hollywood How to Make Films," *Maclean's*, May 1, 1969.

Collaborative Filmmaking

Dennis Lim describes *Opening Night* as “[dramatizing] what Cassavetes’s other films embody—the radical, rupturing search for a truthful means of expression.”¹⁸ In the film, Gena Rowlands plays Myrtle Gordon, an established actor who is struggling to fulfill her role as the star of a play that is rapidly approaching its Broadway premiere. Penned by playwright Sarah Goode (Joan Blondell) and directed by Manny Victor (Ben Gazzara), *The Second Woman* and its lead role of a middle-aged woman coming to terms with her age proves difficult for Myrtle to connect with, despite her best efforts. She strains to mold herself to a part she does not believe in and that she is sure will usher in an unwanted new era of her career, and her collaborators do not seem to understand. This strain is further aggravated following a car accident in which a young fan of Myrtle’s gets killed shortly after their brief encounter in front of the theatre. Myrtle seems to be the only person involved on whom this tragedy has made any impact; everyone around her alternates between walking on eggshells around her and trying to snap her back from her hysterics and into the reality of the production. She is pushed by the director, the playwright, the producer, and her co-stars (including Maurice, played by Cassavetes himself), to shape up and play her part, and to subject to its humiliations—which include being slapped onstage—in such an unmoving way that it leads her to her breaking point. Rather than giving up and losing herself in the part (“I’m in trouble, I’m not acting,” she admits to Manny the day before the premiere), Myrtle breaks away from the play’s structure altogether, choosing instead to forge a path for herself in the absence of leeway. During the titular opening night, she arrives late and staggeringly drunk, and manages to stumble her way through the first part of the play. As she slowly sobers up and the scene in which she must be slapped quickly approaches, she deviates from the script, forcing Maurice to go along with her ad-libbing, which the producers are now powerless to stop. This ending can be interpreted a defeat or as a victory on Myrtle’s part, but in either case it remains as a failure of the producers’ plans. In the end, it is Myrtle who is in control of her performance.

Throughout his career, Cassavetes repeatedly highlighted that what was most important in his films was the actors and their performances, insisting that “only the actor will know what to do.”¹⁹ This was prioritized over other aspects of his work, whether that would be a particularly rigorous visual aesthetic or an adherence to the script as it was originally written. The priority for him was the actors and their interpretations of that script, placed even before his own interpretation of what a performance should convey in a particular scene: “If I have any special way of working, it’s just to set up an atmosphere where what the actors are doing is really important, fun, and nothing takes precedent over it.”²⁰ Rowlands has commented on this in interviews: “John’s attitude to all actors, if we asked any questions about our characters, was, ‘Hey, I wrote this, but I gave it to you. By this time you should know more about [the character] than I do.’ It belonged to you.”²¹ Indeed, to get the best performances from his actors, Cassavetes would withhold his own interpretation of the characters and scenes, relying instead on what each actor thought was best from their position in the production and their character’s role in the narrative. Maria Viera writes

¹⁸ Dennis Lim, “*Opening Night: The Play’s the Thing*,” *The Criterion Collection*, October 25, 2013.

¹⁹ *I’m Almost Not Crazy: John Cassavetes, the Man and his Work*, directed by Michael Ventura (1984, Los Angeles, CA: Cannon Group), DVD.

²⁰ Judith McNally, “*A Woman Under the Influence: An Interview with John Cassavetes*,” in *John Cassavetes: Interviews*, ed. Gabriella Oldham (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2016), 66, previously published in *Filmmakers Newsletter* (January 1975): 23-27.

²¹ Johanna Schneller, “It was obsessive, and we both loved it,” *The Globe & Mail*, July 9th, 2011.

that “[Cassavetes] refused to dictate line readings. He felt that if they were given a complete interpretation of the entire narrative in advance it might ‘simplify’ their performance.”²² Cassavetes’s non-prescriptive approach to actors’ performances in his film somewhat counters the general idea of what a director should be doing, in a more traditional sense: a director directs his actors through a scene, moving them like marionettes and calibrating their performances according to his vision. Within an auteurist framework, audiences and writers tend to think of narrative film production in a hierarchical sense, with the director being the individual behind all creative decisions that make it through the production and into the final film. In his treatise on auteurism as a commercial strategy, Timothy Corrigan writes about film auteurs and states that “despite their large differences, theories and practices of auteurism [...] share basic assumptions about the auteur as the structuring principle of enunciation, an organizing expression of one sort or another.”²³ Cassavetes’s body of work resists this. As early as 1960, the filmmaker stressed the importance of multiple viewpoints in his approach to filmmaking: “If the film is primarily the creation of the director or the writer, then you have only a single viewpoint upon the theme. It is the creation of only one imagination. But if the film is created out of the actors, then the work has as many facets as there are actors; the action is seen in the round—the communal creation of several imaginations.”²⁴ In *Opening Night*, as well as most of Cassavetes’s other films, while his voice does remain that “organizing expression,” it is far from being the only voice.

In my analysis of Rowlands’s performance in films directed by Cassavetes, I consider authorship less as a hierarchical and individual approach to artistic creation than as the result of a filmmaker’s effort to create an environment in which his collaborators can explore and discover their characters in a way that enriches the film. From this viewpoint, I propose authorship in direct opposition to the approach taken by directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, who somewhat jokingly compared actors to cattle and later went on to state that “actors are children, and they’re temperamental, and they need to be handled gently and sometimes...slapped.”²⁵ This dominant approach to filmmaking, in which actors are at best mannequins to be placed and made to move, speak, and emote in the particular ways that the director needs in order to create their vision, is what characterizes this particular form of auteurism. For Cassavetes, an actor himself, the film is made possible because of its performers and what they bring to it. His working process necessitates a certain relinquishing of control, or an approach to directing that does not assume absolute control to be a crucial component of it: “with actors, as with scripts, the director is given material which can be used and organized but not transformed at will.”²⁶ My reading of critics’ auteurist perceptions of Cassavetes’s work draws on his own perception of it. Considering this, we can view Rowlands’s performance as stemming from her own interpretation and experience. I want to use auteurism in a way where it is not solely attached to the figure of the director, instead following

²² Maria Viera, “Playing with Performance: Directorial and Performance Style in John Cassavetes’s *Opening Night*,” in *More Than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance*, ed. Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and Frank P. Tomasulo (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 160.

²³ Timothy Corrigan, “The Commerce of Auteurism: A Voice without Authority,” *New German Critique* no.49 (Winter 1990), 45.

²⁴ Our Special Correspondent, “Mr. John Cassavetes on the Actor and Improvisation,” in *John Cassavetes: Interviews*, ed. Gabriella Oldham, 12, previously published in *Times* (London), August 11, 1960.

²⁵ Peter Bogdanovich, “Talkies: A conversation piece in short takes, starring the Last Tycoons,” *Esquire* 58, no. 2 (August 1962), 35.

²⁶ V.F. Perkins, “Direction and Authorship,” in *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 72-73.

Richard Corliss's conception of a film director as "less [of] a composer than a conductor."²⁷ This makes room to consider Rowlands as an author in her own right, an invaluable and central voice in the creation of Myrtle as a character, and *Opening Night* as a whole.

For an actor to be able to create their own interpretation and performance, there needs to be an environment conducive to that; this could not be possible, or would at the very least be extremely difficult, in a more hierarchically controlled and meticulously prepared production, as in the case of a Hitchcock film. In the production of *Opening Night*, Cassavetes created a safe environment in which the actors could discover their characters together. He believed that performances should be the result of the interactions between actors, rather than from their own understanding of their motivations: "Cassavetes does not attempt to get inside his characters, but rather positions the viewer to observe his characters the way we might encounter them in everyday life."²⁸ This is true of the acting process as well as the way an audience experiences the characters in the film. In everyday life we rarely, if ever, fully understand the motivations and thought processes of the people we interact with, and in turn they can never know our own thoughts except in how we react outwardly, consciously or not. This approach to human behaviour and its believability and spontaneity is one that Cassavetes adheres to and encourages in his performers, stating that "I absolutely refuse to judge the characters in my film and it is imperative that the characters neither analyze themselves nor others during the course of the filming."²⁹ A strong performance is therefore not the result of an individual actor's solitary work in understanding the character they play, nor does it stem from a director's facilitation of that, but it is rather the result of a continuous exploration of interactions, and what those interactions generate. Maria Viera crucially brings up the inherent difference between this approach and that of the Method, writing that "Cassavetes came to believe that acting should be fun and playful, not the serious, laborious work he attributed to the Actors Studio."³⁰ This distinction is important due to the notable absence of a Method influence on either Rowlands's acting style or Cassavetes's directing style, despite that still being a common association to this day. Considering this, we can view Rowlands's performance and choices as stemming from her own interpretation and experience of how her character might act in each scene as garnered from the cast's group work, as I will talk about in the following section when attending to her process of preparation for a role more specifically.

Improvisation

A collaborative environment must involve a certain level of improvisation, since in this type of independent, anti-hierarchical approach to filmmaking, actors do not typically rely exclusively on screenplay. This is not, however, a form of improvisation in the way that it is generally understood as something closer to ad-libbing, which is the spontaneous invention and incorporation of lines in the middle of a performance. One of the most widely held beliefs about Cassavetes's work is that what we are seeing onscreen is improvised in the moment, an acting

²⁷ Richard Corliss, *The Hollywood Screenwriters* (New York: Avon Books, 1970), 10.

²⁸ J.J. Murphy, *Rewriting Indie Cinema: Improvisation, Psychodrama, and the Screenplay* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 50.

²⁹ Gautam Dasgupta, "A Director of Influence, John Cassavetes," in *John Cassavetes: Interviews*, ed. Gabriella Oldham, 99, previously published in *Film* (London) 26 (May 1975): 4-6.

³⁰ Viera, "Playing with Performance," 169.

exercise that happens to be caught on camera and which is subsequently edited together to form a coherent narrative. In fact, *Opening Night* is not a film controlled by the director's solitary and meticulously constructed vision, nor is it a set where there are minimal guiding structures and in which the actors are free to do as they please and make things up as they go along. It exists somewhere in the middle, with exploration being allowed and indeed encouraged, but subsequently worked back into the evolving script. The belief that the greatest performances that Cassavetes drew from his actors were the result of authentic impulsivity *à la* Method acting perhaps comes from the fact that his debut film, *Shadows*, is commonly believed to have been the result of ad-libbing and script-less improvisation, as suggested in the film's ending credits: "The film you have just seen was an improvisation."³¹ While a first version of *Shadows* was much closer to what the title card claims, the final product was largely the result of organized reshoots a few years later in response to criticism of the original film. These reshoots drew from the results of the more freestyle form of its prior version but were themselves scripted, "effectively forfeiting 'improvisation' as an abstract ideal in itself."³² Cassavetes biographer Tom Charity asserts that "so as to honour the collaborative nature of the production, the new *Shadows* retained the original's now rather misleading end credit."³³ This discrepancy cast a shadow over the process of acting and directing in the rest Cassavetes's oeuvre, with improvisation being assumed to be the *modus operandi* of every new film.

Two decades later, the improvisation of *Opening Night* is much closer to how Cassavetes, Rowlands, and their frequent collaborators worked on most of their productions: it was based on the creation of scenarios in which the characters could interact with and react to each other, in order to create more naturalistic scenes.³⁴ For example, to achieve the right atmosphere of authenticity in a scene between Manny and his wife Dorothy (Zohra Lampert), Cassavetes left the camera rolling while the two actors sat and read newspapers until their natural defences had been sufficiently lowered. Lampert explains that "in spending waste film, John had bought freedom for the actors."³⁵ Rather than focusing on their own performances isolated from their scene partners, the actors would instead build their performances through the way they (and their characters) would react to each other. As Viera argues, "the scenes in *Opening Night* can be seen as a series of 'improv exercises.' Yet they are not improv scenes that the actors are actually improvising. Instead, they reflect the writing of Cassavetes, who has structured the script into a series of improv situations that create a space for the actors and characters to interact."³⁶ Though there would be little to no change in dialogue, the context and motivational push for each character were neither unchangeable nor discardable; the script was a tool that could be shaped as needed, a guiding map that could be filled in with details by those who used it.

³¹ *Shadows*, directed by John Cassavetes (1959; New York: Criterion Collection, 2004), DVD.

³² Charity, *John Cassavetes: Lifeworks*, 26.

³³ Charity, *John Cassavetes: Lifeworks*, 32.

³⁴ Joan Blondell, a veteran of the Hollywood studio system since the time of early talkies, was notably shaken by this approach which threw tradition to the wind. Tom Charity describes her confession to Al Ruban, the film's producer, that she "can't tell when the actors are acting and when they're talking about their home life. I just can't tell the difference."

³⁵ Charity, *John Cassavetes: Lifeworks*, 164.

³⁶ Viera, "Playing with Performance," 157.

Though Cassavetes has been referred to as “the method acting director par excellence,”³⁷ Method acting did not factor into the production of *Opening Night*, neither in Rowlands’s performance nor Cassavetes’s approach to directing her in any of their previous collaborations.³⁸ Rowlands’s approach to performance is much closer to what film scholar Cynthia Baron refers to as Modern acting, which is characterized by thinking *as* the character rather than mining and reliving personal experiences to achieve expressions of real feelings in a performance.³⁹ Rowlands worked rather methodically, basing her preparation of her roles first in script analysis—fully familiarizing herself with her lines to perfect her part, before diving into their dissection⁴⁰— and then applying a form of anthropological observation of both herself and the people around her in order to fill in the details. Commenting on her methodology, Rowlands states: “I think it must be like writing, you draw on things you have wondered about, people in restaurants, things you have seen, quarrelling at the table, something here, something there, they all come together in one piece.”⁴¹ Rowlands’s comparison of her acting preparation to the process of writing further highlights the authorship she has over her roles, in that she actively has a hand in creating the characters down to their smallest details. Her particular acting techniques, paired with Cassavetes’s reliance on what his actors bring to their part, creates a kind of authorship; had she been using Method acting techniques, it would remain that what she brings to the part still makes her a co-author of it due to the space given to her by the writer/director. In these Modern techniques one can see the fundamental differences between Rowlands and her character Myrtle, who mines the depths of her own emotional connections to the themes of her play to such an extent that the lack of alignment there becomes an insurmountable obstacle. One could call Myrtle a Method actor who has abandoned rigorous technique, but could not say the same of Rowlands. Furthermore, by conflating character and performer, the methodical labour of preparation done by Rowlands with a professional distance from her character is erased; the perception of her performance of Myrtle’s anguish being uncontrolled and spontaneous erases the work that she actually does to achieve it.

Cassavetes himself was fundamentally opposed to the Actors Studio’s approach to acting and directing, refusing to “film inside the characters”⁴² and critiquing Method acting for “its tendency to isolate characters into solipsistic poses.”⁴³ This shows that the process of character creation and his direction of his actors was done through interaction and collaboration rather than the fostering of internal understandings of the characters, and is reflected in the filmmaking: “Mr. Cassavetes—diverging from the working method advocated by [Stanislavski] and followed, notably, by the Actors Studio—is opposed to group discussion of the characters... Only like this,

³⁷ Katzman, “‘Opening Night’: Moment by Moment,” 35.

³⁸ It is interesting to note that Ben Gazzara *was* trained at the Actors Studio by Lee Strasberg and had expressed concern with how Strasberg would push actors, particularly female, to their extremes. Shonni Elenow has commented on this phenomenon in her book *Method Acting and Its Discontents*, posing the question of whether this concern overshadows the agency of those female actors like Marilyn Monroe and Carroll Baker, who may have *wanted* to see how far they could push themselves.

³⁹ Cynthia Baron, *Modern Acting: The Lost Chapter of American Film and Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), xv.

⁴⁰ Lizzie Francke, “FROM THE INSIDE OUT – Her acting performances are legendary: Lizzie Francke on Gena Rowlands’s achievement,” *Sight & Sound* 5, no. 10 (1995).

⁴¹ Rowlands quoted in Francke.

⁴² Homay King, “Free Indirect Affect in Cassavetes’s *Opening Night* and *Faces*,” *Camera Obscura* 19, no.2 (2004), 7.

⁴³ King, “Free Indirect Affect in Cassavetes’s *Opening Night* and *Faces*,” 9.

he says, can you achieve a genuine collision in the relationships between characters.”⁴⁴ Everything *Opening Night*’s characters do is in reaction to each other, with their emotional states being “linked to a group situation or dynamic, and the responsibility for them [...] likewise collectivized.”⁴⁵ Though Rowlands is undoubtedly the star of the film, her performance, as well as the character of Myrtle, are strengthened by their relationships to those around them and their own methods and personalities.

What many writers, both scholars and journalists, refer to as “Method acting” does not accurately reflect the technique itself as it was developed by Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio; it does not even, in many cases, come close. It is often misunderstood as a process of intense commitment to the physical and psychological realities of inhabiting a character in the pursuit of an “authentic” performance, with authenticity being positioned in opposition to a more noticeably theatrical and stilted style inherited from the British theatre. The Method is generally what intense performance, particularly from a star going through a process of transformation, is attributed to. For example, in her examination of the current state of “Method acting” as a marketing stunt and a consequence of indulgent and permissive industry standards, Angelica Jade Bastién at *The Atlantic* cites Gena Rowlands as a counterexample, as “Hollywood’s best Method actor... her work is proof that performers don’t need to suffer so pronouncedly to move audiences and, ultimately, to be remembered.”⁴⁶ Though her critique of the current form of bastardization of Method acting is an important push against further dilution of the practice and co-opting of it to excuse bad behaviour, she herself mischaracterizes the Method. In this article, Bastién works off the assumption that a Method performance is necessarily one that is memorable and intensely moving, the centerpiece of a film or film scene, and that an intensely moving and memorable performance *must* be the result of the Method’s all-encompassing and emotionally strenuous approach. Her working definition of the Method, and the general cultural shift of its meaning, is more of an extreme form of Modern acting, or a mix of the two: the level of script analysis and in-depth character research of the Modern paired with the deliberate breaking down of boundaries between actor and character of the Method.⁴⁷ In any case, it is not rooted in the Method’s primary technique of sense-memory exercises and emotional substitution. Hence, to identify Rowlands as a Method actor is to misrepresent her and her labour. In Rowlands’s technique there is balance; she does not seem to pour herself into her performances to the point of suffering as her character does, nor does the power of her performance rely on the spectacle of that suffering in any marketable way. The actor, as Beverley Walker contends, “plays women the way women see themselves... always multidimensional and complex”⁴⁸ by balancing memory and research, not into the occupation and surroundings of her characters but of the context the screenplay provides for her, and then builds from there, as previously established, through collaborative work with the other actors. Her work in *Opening Night* and other Cassavetes films, when seen either as the result of the Method being used as intended or as the result of Cassavetes himself shaping it to his vision, is devalued by not being accurately represented.

⁴⁴ Our Special Correspondent, “Mr. John Cassavetes on the Actor and Improvisation,” in *John Cassavetes: Interviews*, 12.

⁴⁵ Maria Viera, “The work of John Cassavetes: Script, Performance Style, and Improvisation,” *Journal of Film and Video* 42, vol. 3 (1990), 2.

⁴⁶ Angelica Jade Bastién, “Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting,” *The Atlantic*, August 11th, 2016.

⁴⁷ Baron, *Modern Acting*.

⁴⁸ Beverley Walker, “Woman of Influence: Gena,” *Film Comment* 25, no. 3 (May-June 1989), 42.

Emotional Overflow

The reception of *Opening Night* was mixed to negative, with many critics reacting strongly to the perceived histrionics of the narrative and the performances. As I will return to in this section, the embarrassment felt by critics at the emotional extremes of the film's characters is interesting given how the film itself directly addresses the difficulty of feeling, successfully performing feeling, and being taken seriously and understood, particularly for women. "When I was seventeen, I could do anything," says Myrtle, first in a voice-over narration at the start of the film and again, later on, when she tries to explain her struggle to Sarah, the playwright. "It was so easy; my emotions were so close to the surface. I am finding it harder and harder to stay in touch."⁴⁹ Myrtle is struggling with her shaken belief that acting should come from an internal fountain of emotion, eternally replenished and easily accessible at will. She cannot conjure up emotion like she used to, which troubles her. She is alienated from herself, from her role in the production, and from whom she is expected and needed to be by her colleagues, who do not give her the space to adjust. This is put even more into perspective when she is faced with uncontrollable emotion of Nancy, the young woman sobbing in her arms, rain and tears dripping from her face as she presses her hands against the glass of the car window in loving gestures, to everyone's embarrassed bewilderment. This brief moment between the two women is engraved even deeper into Myrtle's psyche because of how Nancy dies directly after their meeting. Her figment of Nancy becomes a symbol for much of her struggle with emotion, both felt and performed: "the professional emoter is confronted with the paradox that this amateur, because she has no control over her emotions, can express a tidal wave of ecstasy, devotion, despair and anguish that she herself cannot hope to match."⁵⁰ This is the ease of emotional expression that comes with youth, which Myrtle feels slipping away from her and is not ready to let go of for good. These emotions have come to her so easily before, but the well has run dry. What little support system she has helps to push her to more extreme measures in search of authenticity, measures that Rowlands herself has mentioned no need for. Myrtle cannot connect to her character and is not allowed to make changes to it, to mold the role to her needs even in the smallest ways; instead, she must mold herself to the role, no matter the cost. She is stuck in a rigid traditional system of strict adherence to an unchangeable script, and the director's controlling guidance. "All you have to do," huffs Sarah, "is say the lines clearly and with a degree of feeling, and Virginia will appear."⁵¹

A successful and authentic performance, in this framework, is a commitment and a willingness to suffer for it. For a female actor, this means an adherence to the tradition of gendered suffering in performance. On the level of the film itself it is expected from Rowlands, particularly as she continues to play characters whose narratives revolve around their troubled mental states and difficult relationships. In the absence of readily available and repeatable knowledge of Rowlands's acting techniques, it is assumed that she naturally falls into this tradition, which is seen as the default. It becomes easy to read into her performance and draw parallels between performer and character, as Charity notes before citing producer Al Ruban's rebuttal to this sort of speculation: "Nonsense! [Gena] is a woman who is so strong and confident in her own abilities and so secure. You would never meet a more even-keeled person."⁵² Within the film, adherence

⁴⁹ *Opening Night*, Cassavetes.

⁵⁰ Tom Milne, "Opening Night," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1st, 1978, 117.

⁵¹ *Opening Night*, Cassavetes.

⁵² Al Ruban quoted in Charity, *John Cassavetes: Lifeworks*: 163.

to the tradition of gendered suffering is baked into the play: the script requires that she be slapped by her co-star for stepping out of line, and not the other way around. In the tradition of Hitchcock, actresses get slapped. Though this is a diegetic instance in the film and does not reflect the reality of the its production, it is in conversation with the expectation of gendered suffering in performance spaces. Rowlands and Cassavetes bring attention to a central aspect in the relationship between actors and directors: the setting or breaking of boundaries. This scene in the play is rehearsed early in the film, and the players cannot get through it because Myrtle does not want to—or simply cannot—let herself be slapped by Maurice. Tiana Reid notes that Myrtle is “not so much afraid of the slap itself so much as the making-corporeal of her gendered body on stage—it has the potential to cross that slippery ontological line between performing woman and being one.”⁵³ Manny, the director, grabs Myrtle’s arm, shakes it to loosen her up, and slaps himself with it. “Do it to me,” he says. He then makes her slap Maurice, which she reluctantly does. It is important that the slap is real, reasons Manny, because a faked slap would not be heard by the audience, and so would be unbelievable. When it comes time for Maurice to slap her again, Myrtle screams, ducks away, and then lunges at him in retaliation. On the following attempt, when he swings at her she cries out and falls to the ground before he can touch her. “There’s nothing the matter with Myrtle,” announces Manny to everyone else in the theatre, “she’s just tired.” She continues to lay on the ground. Maurice begins the scene again and she slowly gets up to join him, and when the time comes, he manages to strike her; she collapses to the floor once more and laughs, tears in her eyes. This scene highlights the lack of care Myrtle’s collaborators, particularly her director, have for her mental and physical safety, despite her repeated pushbacks, and is in stark contrast to Cassavetes’s own approach to actors as extensions of the director: “Actors are your arms. They are part of you. Now, if your stomach erupts on you, then you treat it kindly. You don’t punch yourself in the stomach, so you don’t punch actors.”⁵⁴

In the previous scene, which takes place the night before, Myrtle calls Manny on the phone in the middle of the night, distressed about the scene they will be rehearsing. “But it’s not humiliating. There’s nothing humiliating about it,” he reasons. “You know, it’s a tradition. Actresses get slapped. It’s a tradition. Do you want to be a star, or do you want to be unsympathetic? It’s mandatory you get hit. That’s it.”⁵⁵ These two scenes, and these few lines of dialogue, illustrate the way suffering is deemed necessary for art, especially from female actors. Manny’s insistence on tradition is, on Cassavetes’s part as a writer, a pointed indictment of that impulse and the damage it does to actors, particularly women, in what Reid refers to as an enactment of gender that is “constitutive of social domination.”⁵⁶ It’s tradition that actresses get slapped, so you must allow it to happen to you. If you don’t, you will be unsympathetic, you will have a reputation, you’ll have more to worry about than the fact that you’re ageing into a career that values nothing but youth in women. There is no way to do this that does not end with you getting slapped. What’s more, the slap cannot be faked, otherwise the audience will know it isn’t real and will think less of the play. The suspension of disbelief that the very form of theatre relies on is dependent on a woman’s physical and psychic pain. Along with its depiction of the treatment of female actors in the performing arts, this rehearsal scene can be seen as a broader statement on

⁵³ Tiana Reid, “Time Is a Killer,” *The New Inquiry*, July 15th, 2016.

⁵⁴ John Cassavetes quoted in American Film Institute, “Dialogue on Film, No. 4: John Cassavetes, Peter Falk,” in *John Cassavetes: Interviews*, ed. Gabriella Oldham, 41.

⁵⁵ *Opening Night*, Cassavetes.

⁵⁶ Reid, “Time Is a Killer.”

the nature of acting processes; it is a more “romantic” ideal than Rowlands’s quieter and more methodical process is, and it is therefore inherently more interesting to narrativize, more tantalizing to consider, as when Lisa Katzman refers to the slap scene as “method acting at a fever pitch, in which the line between the real experience of the actor and the character is utterly obliterated.”⁵⁷ Intense performance is often understood in this way: it is mandatory to suffer, if you want to give a good dramatic performance. It’s mandatory to dig deep into your own traumas and emotions to the point where the line between performer and character is blurred; to not only push through them but to commodify them, turn them into tools for art. “We must never forget this is only a play.” Myrtle says this after Maurice has slapped her in front of an audience, effectively breaking the fourth wall and taking control of the production by refusing to continue to play along (Fig. 1). Myrtle’s statement can read as a being about the film itself, in a self-reflexive way. It is only a play/film: how much should an actor have to put herself through for it, for the profit of her producers and the fleeting enjoyment of her audience? At what point can a limit be drawn? And whose responsibility is it to determine that?

Critical reactions to Rowlands’s performance as Myrtle and the emotionality of *Opening Night* are echoed in the way everyone except Myrtle reacts to Nancy: her overflow of emotion is painfully embarrassing, and they are more than ready to shake it off entirely and move past it. “Embarrassment” is a word that comes up regularly in reviews of *Opening Night*. This was not new to this film; in her infamous review of Cassavetes’s *A Woman Under the Influence* a few years earlier, film critic Pauline Kael declared that “acute discomfort sets in, and though some in the audience will once again accept what is going on as raw, anguished truth, more people will—rightly, I think—take their embarrassment as evidence of Cassavetes’s self-righteous ineptitude.”⁵⁸ Reviews of *Opening Night* were in a similar register, with Robert Martin at *The Globe and Mail* stating that “the fact that [Cassavetes] seems to be wearing his heart on his sleeve becomes almost embarrassing.”⁵⁹ Marsha Kinder in *Film Quarterly* wrote, more specifically, that “Gina’s [sic] torment smacks more of gratuitous masochism, either pathetically chosen by the actress out of some misguided notion of the suffering artist or imposed on her by her tyrannical director”⁶⁰ in a way that seems to purposefully draw parallels between the real-life actor and director and their filming counterparts, with Manny and Maurice becoming almost interchangeable stand-ins for Cassavetes. This embarrassment ends up sounding like a discomfort at being made to feel something, a discomfort with being witness to the messy feelings that one is not typically privy to when seeing a play (or film) from the safety of the audience. The critics push back against having to see these characters suffer and be pathetic in ways that may feel *too* familiar, both seemingly stripped of filmic conventions and pushing them to their extremes. But reducing the performance and the film as a whole to its emotional excess is to fail to take it on its own terms and see the meaning behind the affect, as Eugenie Brinkema writes of the way affect is often written about: “When affect is taken as a synonym for violence or force (or intensity or sensation), one can only speak of its most abstract agitations instead of any particular textual workings.”⁶¹ By reducing *Opening Night* to the feelings of embarrassment that one may have when watching the emotions

⁵⁷ Katzman, “‘Opening Night’: Moment by Moment,” 38.

⁵⁸ Pauline Kael, “A Woman Under the Influence,” *The New Yorker*, December 9th, 1975.

⁵⁹ Robert Martin, “John Cassavetes’s *Opening Night* flounders and sinks,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 23rd, 1977.

⁶⁰ Marsha Kinder, “Opening Night,” *Film Quarterly* 31, no.4 (Summer 1978), 52.

⁶¹ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), *xiii*.

it explores, its textual exploration of those very emotions becomes lost on the viewer, as is the skill behind Rowlands's expert rendering of them.

Some middling to positive reviews embraced what the negative critiques pushed back on, such as the film's commitment to showing the messiness of personal crises and interpersonal relationships in the context of the performing arts. In film reviews, the context of production is understandably absent, for lack of access and lack of relevance, but that mystery invites speculation. The possibility that we as the audience are getting an unmediated look, however fleeting, at the hardships of creating art, is certainly intriguing. There is an expectation that artists will tell on themselves, write and perform self-reflectively, particularly when those artists are women. There is, in these more positive reviews, still a confusion between the production environment represented in the film and what Cassavetes's set would actually have looked like. Many critics are all too eager to make metatextual comparisons between the actor and director and their filmic counterparts. For example, Gary Arnold at *The Washington Post's* review appraises Gena Rowlands's career and concludes that it is a net loss: "on the whole, it's depressing to watch Rowlands struggling to make a virtue of disorganized exhibitionism. One feels a certain lingering regret about her career. Her face, voice, and sensibility promised more than circumstances have ever permitted to achieve. If she hadn't become her husband's leading lady, she might have evolved into a star."⁶² This speculation about how Rowlands might feel about her own career fails to take the work that she has done seriously, and presumes that she would have been freer to do better in a more traditional studio setting. A few years earlier, when asked if she missed the glamour girl image of her MGM days at the beginning of her career, Rowlands insisted that she did not; it would have been artificial and short-lived, compared to the work she was able to do with Cassavetes and the artistic freedom they had carved out for themselves.⁶³

The Curtain Falls

In the absence of context, critics and viewers often default to equating actors with characters and viewing them as stage props to be moved around by directors. The quintessential image of an auteur is that of a controlling and obsessive director making a film according to their singular vision, perhaps battling with the studio or with distributors to be able to do so. For Cassavetes, while it is true that he battled with studios for creative freedom and worked independently whenever possible, it was in large part to be able let his performers be able to freely create. Cassavetes is known as a filmmaker who fought for agency as a writer and director. The assumption of agency, or the fight for agency, is rarely extended to Rowlands herself as an actor. The key difference between Gena Rowlands and Myrtle Gordon is that Rowlands does not have to resort to what Myrtle does, because she has already been given the space to explore and create with her fellow performers and is working in an environment that has been purposefully created to allow safe exploration into emotionally difficult territory. Rowlands does not have to fight as hard as Myrtle does against the industry principles or production standards, because they are not being upheld as severely by her collaborators. The performance Rowlands gives as Myrtle is one that is deeply felt, committed to showing the depth of pain that she feels, the roiling uncertainty

⁶² Gary Arnold, "'Opening': A Glorified Home Movie," *The Washington Post*, April 15th, 1978.

⁶³ Higham, "The Family That Films Together May Win Oscars Together."

and fear, and her loosening grip on reality, all the while remaining exceptionally sympathetic. I as a viewer feel deeply for Myrtle and want her to succeed; I want to see her figure out a way to be an actor on her own terms, to fight her way out of the rigid walls of the box she is being pushed into by an industry that demands youth's endless fountain of emotion and endurance. She struggles to make her collaborators understand what acting truly means to her, and how it isn't as simple as "saying the lines clearly and with a degree of feeling." Nor should it have to require her to plumb the depths of her psyche, to allow herself to be pushed beyond what her dignity would allow; she *was* slapped for real, repeatedly, no matter what the director could say to placate her. Rebellion against the script on opening night is not only a rebellion, but a reclaiming of agency. The ending of the film is a triumphant rejection of an unfeeling script and an embracing of uncontrollability; she harnesses that uncontrollability, and everyone around her is forced to either play along or bring the play to an end. Though her mental turmoil may have pushed her to the point of madness, it is treated as a positive and even necessary development: "Cassavetes envisioned Myrtle's madness not simply as a sympathetic condition but as a transformative power."⁶⁴ While the extended scene of Myrtle and Maurice improvising onstage, filmed from within the audience, may be a contributing factor to the enduring myth of Cassavetes's use of improvisation and the further erasure of Rowlands's own technique, it is decidedly triumphant. The slap never comes; she has made it clear that her voice is crucial to the entire production. She has replaced suffering with laughter, to rapturous applause.

⁶⁴ Katzman, "Opening Night: Moment by Moment," 38.

Chapter Two
“The Spectacle of Fearsome Acts”



Fig. 2 — Jake LaMotta (Robert De Niro) between rounds.



Fig. 3 — Bill the Butcher (Daniel Day-Lewis) threatens a man.

Transformative Power

Robert De Niro and Daniel Day-Lewis are two of the most lauded male actors in the last few decades of American film. They are well known for their intense dramatic performances, as well as the working methods they have developed to achieve those performances, methods which

have taken center stage in the media coverage of both actors. De Niro first rose to prominence early in his career in the 1970s following acting training with Stella Adler. His performances in films by Martin Scorsese such as *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Taxi Driver* (1976), consolidated with the role of middleweight boxer Jake LaMotta in Scorsese's *Raging Bull* (1980), established him as a major star. *Raging Bull* was a project that De Niro himself engendered, following it from its origins as an autobiography to early script drafts and through its production, and eventually winning the Academy Award for Best Actor for his performance as LaMotta. It was a highly studied performance, the result of over a year of research and boxing training with LaMotta himself, as well as De Niro's undertaking physical transformations in order to fully embody the famed middleweight boxer and to impersonate him much heavier later in his life.⁶⁵ *Raging Bull* is considered by many to be the peak of De Niro's long career, a role in which, according to biographer Shawn Levy, the actor "[dove] as deeply into his roles as any Method actor ever had."⁶⁶ In the decades since, De Niro has rarely tackled another performance of this magnitude.

Daniel Day-Lewis comes from a considerably different background than De Niro. He was originally trained in a British school of acting and spent the first several years of his career onstage before transitioning to film, gaining major media attention for his performance in Stephen Frears' independent film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985).⁶⁷ Since his appearance in Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), which launched him into international stardom, he has been mostly associated with US cinema, both art and Hollywood films. Similarly to De Niro, he is known primarily for the intensity of his method of preparing for and performing the roles he undertakes, such as the fact that he often chooses to remain in character throughout the duration of the film shoot. This was most notably the case in his portrayal of Christy Brown, an Irish artist with cerebral palsy, in Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* (1989). De Niro has not held the same level of physical and psychological commitment that he showed in *Raging Bull* throughout his prolific and diversified acting career. In contrast, Day-Lewis has remained dedicated to a totalizing style of preparation with every role he has taken on, which has resulted in a much shorter career. Having first worked with Scorsese on *The Age of Innocence* (1993), Day-Lewis reunited with the director for *Gangs of New York* (2002), a mid-19th century New York-set historical crime epic in which he played its central antagonist, Bill the Butcher. According to some critics, his stage background and British formation lingers on in his later film appearances in American dramas, either as a residual label or as a particular style developed for himself, which film critic Elise Moore links him to an anti-realistic Brechtian style rather than to the naturalism Method acting with which he is generally associated.⁶⁸

To compare De Niro and Day-Lewis is to draw a line following what "Method acting" has come to signify throughout the last several decades of US cinema. At the beginning of his career, in the 1970s and 1980s, De Niro was often likened to Marlon Brando and hailed as his successor; according to director Martin Scorsese, "they made realism a virtue [...]. Brando created that style,

⁶⁵ Colin R. Tait, "Robert De Niro's *Raging Bull*: The History of a Performance and a Performance of History," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011).

⁶⁶ Shawn Levy, *Robert De Niro: A Life* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2014): 3.

⁶⁷ Laura Jackson, *Daniel Day-Lewis: The Biography* (London: Smith Gryphon, 1995).

⁶⁸ Elise Moore, "Making America Strange Again," *Bright Wall/Dark Room* 80 (February 2020), <https://www.brightwalldarkroom.com/2020/02/18/gangs-of-new-york-2002/>.

and De Niro moves ahead with it.”⁶⁹ He became the new young and magnetic male actor to fill the gap that had been left by Brando, and was even trained by the same acting teacher, Stella Adler. In turn, from the late 1980s to his retirement from acting in 2017, Day-Lewis has taken up a similar performance style based in complete embodiment of a character: “like Robert De Niro, the original ‘goddamn chameleon,’ Daniel Day-Lewis has the uncanny ability to transform himself beyond recognition.”⁷⁰ Importantly, both actors are very private and have been for most of their careers, seldom giving interviews and both very reluctant to talk about their work in any detail. I argue that this privacy increases the fascination with these actors’ working methods and star personas, as the sole manner through which audiences can experience them is through the intense and often violent characters they portray on screen.

I chose to focus this chapter on both actors’ lauded performances in films directed by Martin Scorsese, namely *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Gangs of New York* (2002), in order to map out the discourse around Method acting, intense dramatic performances, and the tension between stardom and artistry. Their collaboration with Scorsese is particularly significant, as he is well-known for being an actor’s director and prioritizing the working methods preferred by his stars to achieve the best performances possible. In the critical and media coverage of these actors’ careers, and particularly surrounding the reception of the two films examined in this chapter, there is an emphasis on what is perceived to be somewhat outlandish and exaggerated working methods that then become the main points of interest above the final performances themselves. De Niro and Day-Lewis seek to disappear into their characters through a long process of meticulous research, physical transformation, and by remaining in character for the duration of the film’s production. The complete transformation they work towards is at odds with their stardom, as critics and the media continuously seek to define their behind-the-scenes methods, therefore preventing the actors from ever fully disappearing into their characters. I argue that De Niro and Day-Lewis’s methods, as well as the media’s sensationalist reporting of those methods, both seek to justify and legitimize the act of performing itself.

To prove my argument, I will begin this chapter with an overview of “Method acting” as it is commonly referred to by media outlets and the public and as it has developed as an acting technique; both definitions do not necessarily align. This overview is crucial to the discussion of De Niro and Day-Lewis, as they are frequently cited as some of the most notable Method actors of their generations, despite not adhering to the Method itself as it has been developed by Lee Strasberg’s Actors Studio, of which a central technique called for actors to look inward and plumb their own psyche for inspiration.⁷¹ De Niro and Day-Lewis are arguably more indebted to Konstantin Stanislavski’s style and teachings, particularly as those teachings were taken up and expanded upon by Stella Adler: “Stanislavski wasn’t dogmatic about the practice of mining one’s actual psyche or past—in fact, he feared it might evoke hysteria. And he acknowledged that there were outstanding actors who achieved similar effects without following his ideas. But taken as a whole, his theories amounted to a revolutionary reconsideration of the craft and intent of acting.”⁷² To create a clear picture of how each actor worked to create their characters and the reasoning behind their seemingly outlandish techniques, the central part of this chapter will be dedicated to

⁶⁹ Chris Hodenfield, “Martin Scorsese: ‘You’ve got to love something enough to kill it’” *American Film*, 1 March 1989.

⁷⁰ Christine De Liagre, “New Again: Daniel Day-Lewis,” *Interview*, 22 June 2017.

⁷¹ Baron, *Modern Acting*, 22.

⁷² Levy, *Robert De Niro: A Life*, 49.

understanding the roots of their distinct approaches. Additionally, this section will show how these approaches have, due to a lack of proper contextualization in writing about the actors, been misunderstood and misrepresented by media outlets throughout the years.

I will then delve into how each actor prepared for their roles. In both cases, they are playing versions of real and violent men, with differing degrees of distance and, as a result, different access to character-building research material. While De Niro was playing Jake LaMotta, a man who was still alive and with whom he consulted and trained extensively, allowing him to get into the granular details he wished to portray, Day-Lewis could only use historical accounts and approximations to play William “Bill the Butcher” Cutting, a fictionalized version of William Poole, who bore the same nickname. Day-Lewis’s characterization therefore relies on the historical context available to him: the vintage New York City accent he takes on, the costuming and overall look of the character, and his own larger-than-life version of Bill the Butcher’s violent and fearsome temperament. What both actors and their performances share, however, is their insistence on choosing to remain in character as the intensely violent and explosive men they portray, in an effort to maintain concentration and a connection to their characters during the film’s production. They are also linked through their collaboration with a director, Martin Scorsese, who encouraged his actors to do what they needed to best portray their characters.

I will then examine how the media emphasizes the difficulty of the character-building process and the performance itself, primarily for themselves and often for their collaborators as well. I will outline the difference in how their methods are treated in various forms of media. Interviews, biographies, and similarly in-depth profiles of the actors seek to get to the bottom of what the motivations behind their methods are, and why they work better for each actor than something perceived as simpler or less intense. Similarly, critical reviews of the films I will be discussing tend to grapple with whether the performances resulting from the actors’ methods are successful or not. On the other hand, there are many articles and listicles with titles like “The Wildest Things Daniel Day-Lewis Has Done to Prepare for Roles”⁷³ that are built around the sensationalizing of those methods, feeding the perception that they are both exceptional and unreasonable, and comparing them to other, less successful cases of actors with eccentric and intense acting methods. Angelica Jade Bastién, in her argument that “Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting” in the specific context of Jared Leto’s on-set “in-character” behaviour for his performance as the Joker in *Suicide Squad* (2016), points to *Raging Bull* as the turning point: “*Raging Bull* marked a shift in this approach being seen as viable, profitable, and awardable.”⁷⁴ Day-Lewis, particularly with his turns in *Gangs of New York* and, a few years later, *There Will Be Blood* (2007), is an equally crucial figure in the shifting understanding of “Method acting” and its usefulness: is it a legitimate artistic process, or a marker of a big ego and strategic marketing? De Niro and Day-Lewis, who have both been averse to media attention throughout their careers, both contend that their central priority has been to disappear as fully as possible into their characters to best understand them (and therefore best portray them), and that the difficulty in achieving this is what they seek in order to experience acting as a legitimate form of labour.

⁷³ Dan Jackson, “The Wildest Things Daniel Day-Lewis Has Done to Prepare for Roles,” *Thrillist*, 19 January 2018, <https://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/daniel-day-lewis-method-acting-stories>.

⁷⁴ Bastién, “Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting.”

Legacies of Style

Violence is no stranger in the films of Martin Scorsese, nor is an attention to history, both distant and more recent. Indeed, “the best, most powerful films in Martin Scorsese’s brilliant career have all been preoccupied with the nature of violence in American life.”⁷⁵ *Raging Bull* is an intimate portrait of boxer Jake LaMotta, following his rise and fall from the early 1940s to the 1960s. Based on LaMotta’s own 1970 memoir *Raging Bull: My Story*, and adapted by frequent Scorsese collaborators Paul Schrader and Mardik Martin, it is a film that pulls no punches in regards to LaMotta’s violent nature both in and out of the ring: “In *Raging Bull*, De Niro presents a somewhat self-loathing LaMotta, illuminating the dangers of unexamined rage.”⁷⁶ Rather than creating a comprehensive biography of LaMotta and following the story of the boxer chronologically through all the stages of his life and career, the film takes a more thematic structure by focusing on how LaMotta’s insecurities manifest through violence and a need to come out on top. His relationships with his brother Joey (Joe Pesci) and his young wife Vicki (Cathy Moriarty) are what shape the core of the film, along with boxing scenes (Fig. 2) that mark the passage of time. The film begins and ends with scenes of LaMotta in 1964, when he is no longer a boxer and is instead a Miami nightclub owner, much larger than he was at the peak of his career in the 1940s and now practicing comedy routines and Marlon Brando’s famous monologue from Elia Kazan’s award-winning *On the Waterfront* (1954) in front of a dressing room mirror before performing in front of a muted and unenthusiastic crowd. The film is a searing portrait of a man who conflates violence with masculinity, masculinity with power, and has been both criticized and praised for its frankness in depicting the intense brutality in question. In nearly all the coverage of the film, De Niro’s performance was the central talking point, with Vincent Canby accurately predicting in his review that “too much will be made, probably, of Mr. De Niro’s remarkable physical transformations for the role, by means of makeup as well as by putting on 50 pounds of weight for the latter part of the film.”⁷⁷

Two decades later, Scorsese again directed a film that was chiefly received as a showcase for its central performance, though in this case there was much more to compete with. If *Raging Bull* is a portrait, *Gangs of New York* is more of a crowded narrative landscape, attempting to capture in vivid detail what life in the early years of the titular city would have been like. Though it operates on a much larger scale, the film is interested in the same themes as much of his other work, as A.O. Scott writes in his review: “Mr. Scorsese has functioned as a kind of romantic visual anthropologist, fascinated by tribal lore and language, by half-acknowledged codes of honor and retribution and by the boundaries between loyalty and vengeance, between courtesy and violence, that underlie a given social order.”⁷⁸ The film follows a young man named Amsterdam (Leonardo DiCaprio), who has returned to Five Points as an adult after witnessing, as a child, his father be murdered in a gang battle by Bill the Butcher (Daniel Day-Lewis), the rival gang leader. Amsterdam seeks to get close to Bill, to gain his trust enough to kill him, thus avenging his father. Though the young man is the protagonist of the film, it does not follow him too closely; much of the film’s nearly three-hour runtime is preoccupied with everything—and everyone—around him, with the time and place itself. As a result, what emerges in the foreground is the film’s loudest and

⁷⁵ Michael Dwyer, “Good fella yourself, Daniel,” *The Irish Times*, 20 May 2003.

⁷⁶ Gretchen Schwartz, “‘You Talkin’ to Me?’: De Niro’s Interrogative Fidelity and Subversion of Masculine Norms,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 41, no. 3: 460.

⁷⁷ Vincent Canby, “Movie: Robert De Niro in ‘Raging Bull’,” *The New York Times*, 14 November 1980.

⁷⁸ A.O. Scott, “To Feel A City Seethe,” *The New York Times*, 20 December 2002.

most fascinating performance, that of Day-Lewis as the antagonist. Though operating on two different levels, one a character study and the other a sprawling epic, both films revolve around the actors' performances of violent men and their work to portray them in the most comprehensive and fully realized manner possible.

In order to discuss each actor's acting style, it is important to go back to their personal training. Robert De Niro completed his acting formation with Stella Adler, at the Stella Adler Conservatory of Acting. According to Cynthia Baron, Adler's techniques can be categorized as hueing closer to "Modern acting" than the "Method acting" it is often wrongfully described as.⁷⁹ Similarly to the Method developed by Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio, Adler's teachings were rooted in those of Konstantin Stanislavski, albeit very differently: "She understood the principle task of Stanislavskian acting to be an imaginative commingling of the actor with the text and with the human situations contained in it—not a mining of the self to fill the emotions of the scene with traces of one's own life, but an effort to picture oneself in the shoes of one's character and then behaving as one's character would."⁸⁰ Adler's training emphasizes disciplined studying of the script and character and encourages research into the realities of a character's life, whether it be in terms of occupation, life experience, speech patterns, or otherwise. Rather than building a performance from the ways one can personally relate to a character, under Adler, the actor is encouraged to reach outwards and learn as much as they can about a character, which involves developing them beyond what is in the script, in order to best embody them. De Niro responded well to these techniques and would use them throughout the most important years of his career, when he developed his most interesting and fully realized performances. According to R. Colin Tait, who has made use of the archive of De Niro's research materials donated by the actor to the University of Texas,

"it is impossible to overstate the influence of Stella Adler on Robert De Niro's process, in addition to the teachings she derived from Stanislavski. As opposed to Lee Strasberg's approach, which emphasized "affective memory," or the actor's ability to produce emotions based on his own experiences, Adler's technique involved researching the character's social milieu and class, as well as utilizing props and costumes that rooted the actor to these realities."⁸¹

This influence can clearly be seen in the scale of De Niro's preparations for the role of LaMotta in *Raging Bull*, which will be described in further detail below.

Though Daniel Day-Lewis had roots in theater and a classical British school of acting training before turning to a more Stanislavski-informed style of acting as he came into his own in the early stages of his film career, his own methods of preparing for a part are comparable to De Niro's, and he has been said to "[represent] the culmination of sixty years of Method acting on film."⁸² While, like De Niro, it is inaccurate to label his style as being directly associated with that of the Method, this is nevertheless a label that stuck to him as his process of preparing for a role

⁷⁹ Baron, *Modern Acting*, 41.

⁸⁰ Levy, *Robert De Niro: A Life*: 50.

⁸¹ Tait, "Robert De Niro's *Raging Bull*," 28.

⁸² Dennis Bingham, "Broken Nose and All: Daniel Day-Lewis and the Performance of Disruption," in *Star Bodies and the Erotics of Suffering*, ed. Rebecca Bell-Meterau and Colleen Glenn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015): 100.

became more and more of a point of interest. Day-Lewis's formal British training is particularly interesting because of how his style, when fully developed, differs so wildly from what such training seeks to foster, which has been criticized as being stiff and overly formal. In contrast, styles that hue closer to the Method are "praised for being authentic 'American' acting, physically active and associated with spontaneity, intensity, and defiant emotionality."⁸³ This contrast is visible in Day-Lewis's most notable roles, which have been the ones that have been the fruits of the most overt labour: his work in *My Left Foot* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, both of which predate *Gangs of New York*, stand out in particular. When questioned about this stylistic shift, Day-Lewis has been clear in his reasoning for why he prefers to work in a more "American" register that consciously distances itself from overly articulated poise, arguing that he is "more greatly moved by people who struggle to express themselves. [...] I prefer the abstract concept of incoherence in the face of great feeling to beautiful, full sentences that convey little emotion."⁸⁴ It is worth noting that one of the major influences on Day-Lewis was De Niro himself, whom he saw in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) while he himself was still in the early stages of his career and trying to find the acting style that he worked best in.⁸⁵

Both actors share a desire to create a fully fleshed-out person to inhabit, different enough from themselves in their day-to-day lives that they require a solid and extensive groundwork of meticulous research and disciplined study of the text to create it. Just as the screenwriters and the director can be considered authors of the film through their contribution to the script and the mise-en-scène, the actors are co-authors of the characters at the film's heart because of how they bring to life what is on the page. Rather than reaching inwards for the intensity of emotion necessary (in the case of LaMotta and Cutting, an intensity of rage), both actors instead throw themselves into accurately living the part of the characters in a self-effacing way. The goal, ultimately, is to truly disappear into the person they are portraying, to leave their own selves behind. This is achieved through a process of accumulation of information pertaining to the character's life, as well as repetition, as Day-Lewis describes: "The thing that Stanislavsky lays out is how you do the thing the first time every time—1,000 times. That's the idea you're always searching for."⁸⁶ In an interview, he is defensive of Stanislavski's approach to acting and irritated with dismissals of it from actors like Laurence Olivier, who famously hand-waved it away in favour of the practicality and supposed lack of histrionics of the British style. "Olivier was a remarkable actor," says Day-Lewis, "but he was entirely missing the point consistently. He felt that film was an inferior form."⁸⁷ Day-Lewis here points to the history of how Stanislavski's techniques and the kind of acting they encourage has been taken up by the performing arts; it is generally thought of by many as belonging to the cinema rather than the theater, particularly classical theater. In this way, it is the newer and less established approach to performance, arguably showier and more volatile, but above all more all-encompassing. What criticism of Method acting often points to is its tendency towards exaggeration and extreme behaviour in the search for "truth" in performance. Even without Strasberg's encouragement of "tapping into private, often traumatic, experiences [as] the

⁸³ Baron, *Modern Acting*, 72.

⁸⁴ Day-Lewis quoted in Lynn Hirschberg, "In 1976, When He was 19..." *The New York Times*, 11 November 2007.

⁸⁵ Of De Niro, Day-Lewis has said: "The world he offered in his performances has a palpable humanity. I was utterly sure that he was that man in 'Taxi Driver.' I have no idea by what means he arrived at that but, I dare say, at some point, he convinced himself that he was that man too." One could say the same of Day-Lewis's own performances, and the means by which he achieves them. (Hirschberg 2007)

⁸⁶ Hirschberg, "In 1976, When He was 19..."

⁸⁷ Hirschberg.

only way to trigger ‘real emotions in performance’,⁸⁸ it is true that the actors whose adherence to more grounded Stanislavskian techniques is the most well-known are those who push it to extremes. *Raging Bull* remains a crucial example of this, as it has been argued that “De Niro’s meticulous (and perhaps excessive) investigation surpasses comparable expressions of method acting.”⁸⁹ There are however countless actors, even at similar levels of fame as De Niro and Day-Lewis, who follow similar techniques of research and character development without reaching such levels, but those do not tend to attract as much attention from a media landscape more interested in exceptional examples.

Both De Niro and Day-Lewis, as most actors do, have adapted what they learned from their formal training and influences into something that works best for them individually. De Niro was trained by Stella Adler, but it cannot be said that his way of working can wholly be attributed to that training, particularly as his roles have changed throughout his career. At the height of his career, he did not work quite like he did at the beginning, and decades later it is clear that he no longer works as he did in the late 1970s. When asked, in 1998, if he still believed in “the Method for which he is famous,” he said that “A moment might come that something will flash in your head, and it’ll make the take. That’s my method. The Method is whatever works for you, as long as you don’t hurt yourself or anybody else.”⁹⁰ Daniel Day-Lewis’s “Method” has only drawn more confusion and questions, both because of his shift away from his earlier training as well as the consistency of anecdotes about his remaining in character throughout multiple productions. Elise Moore argues that this too does not tie him to the Method: “Day-Lewis’s performance is about as far from the popular conception of method acting—naturalism informed by interiority—as it can get. [...] Just because an actor likes to stay in character throughout the shoot doesn’t mean they’re doing method acting—so did Bela Lugosi when filming *Dracula*.”⁹¹ Day-Lewis has consistently responded to the interest by tying it back to what it means to perform at all: “I’m told that people find it strange that I do the work the way I do it,” he says, “but then I think, ‘Well, yes, but the work is inherently strange.’ We’re spending the better part of our lives pretending to be other people. Stranger from my point of view is to have the capacity to jump in and out, which some people undeniably have. I’m kind of in awe of those people.”⁹² Both actors do not disparage the way other actors work that they themselves may not be able to do if they tried; rather, they highlight the fact that they have adapted the tools at their disposal to best suit them, as any performer should.

Working Methods

Both Robert De Niro and Daniel Day-Lewis strive to fully become their character and inhabit their mindset as completely as possible. They do so by getting as close as they can to that character in the external ways available to them, in ways that I will lay out in more detail shortly. They attempt to disappear into the character, to transform. This approach prioritizes the verisimilitude of the way the actor behaves and presents himself as his character, and from there comes the suggestion of interiority. In discussing Marlon Brando’s turn as Vito Corleone in *The*

⁸⁸ Baron, *Modern Acting*, 26.

⁸⁹ Tait, “Robert De Niro’s *Raging Bull*,” 21.

⁹⁰ Sarah Grist Wood, “Has De Niro Lost His Punch?” *The Globe and Mail*, 27 November 1998.

⁹¹ Elise Moore, “Making America Strange Again.”

⁹² Sarah Lyall, “The Daniel Day-Lewis Method: A Kind of Vanishing Act,” *The New York Times*, 9 March 2003.

Godfather (1972), film scholar James Naremore points to the actor's reliance on mimicry, his tendency to "hide behind changes of accent and makeup," which he positions as being dissimilar to the typical Stanislavskian actor.⁹³ The same can be said of De Niro and Day-Lewis, as they rely heavily on the immersive quality of performance to a degree that surpasses most other actors. De Niro has claimed that he cannot "fake" acting: "I know movies are an illusion, and maybe the first rule is to fake it, but not for me. I'm too curious. I want the experience. I want to deal with all the facts of the character, thin or fat."⁹⁴ De Niro's meticulous research process is then re-presented in his performance, as his interpretation of what he has learned through experiencing what the character would have experienced. Tait compares it to the methodological process of studying history: "Much like a historian would write a book about their findings, De Niro *performs* this history instead, interpreting the facts as truthfully as they apply to his character and acting them out. Upon principal photography, he extended the writing process with his flesh."⁹⁵ A similar comparison has been made in the case of Day-Lewis as he has continued to play American historical figures since *The Last of the Mohicans*. Like De Niro, it can be said that he performs the history he has investigated, albeit a much older history, one without sources as clear and readily accessible as the ability to shadow the person he would be portraying.⁹⁶ Both actors share this desire to experience a character and their circumstances rather than simply "fake" it, as De Niro put it. Jim Sheridan, a director with whom Day-Lewis has frequently collaborated, posits that the actor rejects the idea of "acting" altogether, as paradoxical as that may seem: "Instead, like the greats he admires (Brando and De Niro, before they started working for the money), he needs to fully embody a character. That sort of detailed, engulfing work is time-consuming and enervating. Which partially explains why Day-Lewis has long gaps between roles and has only made four films in the last 10 years."⁹⁷ Their attention to physical detail in order to accurately represent the subject matter—the character's own way of expressing themselves, and the way the era they are from interacts with and influences that expression—is in line with their shared director Martin Scorsese's treatment of the narrative and setting. Scorsese himself gives great attention to these kinds of details, particularly when it comes to the representation of a specific time and space that has since disappeared. This prioritization of setting is sometimes to the detriment of the film's narrative, as was the case with *Gangs of New York* in the eyes of many critics: "if the idea expressed by the word 'movie' is some sort of meta-museum of history that shows you exhibits, then 'Gangs of New York' cannot be missed... Unfortunately, if your idea of movies comprises one word and that word is 'story,' you're going to be disappointed."⁹⁸ This is not so much the case with *Raging Bull*, which had a much smaller narrative scope and was, arguably, more suited to an in-depth investigation of its lead character.

Robert De Niro's preparation for *Raging Bull* lasted around a year before the film went into principal photography and continued throughout its production in different ways. As

⁹³ James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998): 196.

⁹⁴ Levy, *Robert De Niro: A Life*, 241.

⁹⁵ Tait, "Robert De Niro's *Raging Bull*," 22.

⁹⁶ Hirschberg suggests that Day-Lewis's work with historical American accents in particular "might make one ask if actors can be linguists, especially pre-Saussure historical linguists." For his performance as Bill the Butcher, Day-Lewis had no recourse to tools such as recordings of how people spoke in mid-1800s New York and instead had to work with an accent coach to develop a voice that would be historically accurate without being too alienating for a modern audience.

⁹⁷ Hirschberg, "In 1976, When He was 19...".

⁹⁸ Stephen Hunter, "A Bloodied Past," *The Washington Post*, 20 December 2002.

previously mentioned, he spent much time with Jake LaMotta in order to observe him as much as he could: “He followed me around with a tape recorder *for a year*,” said LaMotta when interviewed around the release of the film. “He knows more about me than I know myself... We’re a lot alike... The one thing he and Scorsese were interested in was to be as honest as possible.”⁹⁹ Though he had read LaMotta’s memoir and used it as the basis for the film, the access that De Niro had to the man himself as well as the freedom to portray him as honestly as he saw fit was crucial to his interpretation of the man. One issue that frequently arises in the making of biographical films is the tension between a truthful portrayal of the subject, for better or worse, and the continued cooperation of that subject or their estate; in this case, it seems that LaMotta did not try to hide the worst aspects of his life in which he was often the destructive force, nor did the filmmakers shy away from portraying them. In fact, this commitment to honesty seemed to be one of the driving factors of LaMotta’s cooperation.¹⁰⁰

De Niro’s physical transformation is the central aspect of much of the coverage of *Raging Bull*, and it is twofold: his boxing training, and his weight gain. This undertaking of physical change has become one of the defining features of the best years of his career: “His body [...] was a malleable thing, at times chiseled and fit, at times soft and homey, now and then genuinely rotund. Lots of actors changed their looks for parts with makeup, hairpieces, prosthetics; De Niro, more than once, changed his entire shape, his commitment to his roles so thoroughgoing as to make his journey *beneath* the skin immediately apparent, like a tattoo, *upon* the skin.”¹⁰¹ To accurately portray LaMotta at his peak as a middleweight boxing champion, De Niro trained with him for a year, to the point where he was good enough to take on professionals and beat LaMotta himself.¹⁰² This amount of training would mold his body into the shape of a professional boxer, as anyone can see in the film. It did not, however, get the same attention as the other phase of his physical changes, which was the fifty to sixty pounds he gained to play LaMotta in the later years. More than being something De Niro did to visibly resemble LaMotta—after all, the standard practice was and remains the use of fat suits and other similar prosthetics—this weight gain was a practical undertaking, a way to further understand the boxer. “I needed to feel Jake’s shame at getting fat,” said De Niro. “To feel my feet hurt with the extra weight, to know what it’s like to be short of breath and not be able to bend down to tie your shoes.”¹⁰³ This transformation affected the way he performed in a way that may not have occurred had he not done it; as previously stated, he preferred to take this more strenuous route rather than “fake” it. When filming resumed after he had gained the weight, it was not only different for him but for everyone involved in the filmmaking process as well, as Scorsese later attested: “With the bulk he put on, he wasn’t doing forty takes. It was three or four. The body dictated.”¹⁰⁴

For Day-Lewis’s turn as Bill the Butcher (Fig. 3), there was less focus on how he physically adapted to the role and more on how he would psychologically “transform” into the man and, after the shoot had ended, how he would separate himself from that mindset. Day-Lewis has on numerous occasions struggled to explain this process in a way that would not feed the rumours

⁹⁹ Jay Scott, “I can take it—that’s the story of my life,” *The Globe and Mail*, 4 December 1980.

¹⁰⁰ Scott, “I can take it—that’s the story of my life.”

¹⁰¹ Levy, *Robert De Niro: A Life*, 9.

¹⁰² Scott, “I can take it—that’s the story of my life.”

¹⁰³ Levy, *Robert De Niro: A Life*: 241.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew J. Rausch, *The Films of Martin Scorsese and Robert De Niro* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press Inc, 2010): 81.

and awe which surrounds his acting and which he tends to shy away from. Though he does not underplay the difficulty of the task he undertakes and the length it takes, he also does not frame it as something either exceptional or negative. “It can be six or eight months. It has been longer,” he says. “People talk, apparently on my behalf, about this torturous preparation period, but it misses the point, because for me it’s sheer pleasure.”¹⁰⁵ What he refers to here is the pleasure of learning, which he has said chiefly takes place before the shooting of the film has even begun, and what has been discovered and accumulated throughout that process is then given away in the form of the performance.¹⁰⁶ In the lead-up to the release of *Gangs of New York* as well as its awards campaign, stories of Day-Lewis learning to throw knives and skillfully butcher animals circulated. It was a unique combination of an actor being so committed to playing a character who was himself a man of extremes, as his biographer outlines: “Stories leaked of the lengths Daniel went to get inside this particularly vivid character. Some were to be expected—for instance, that Daniel, maintaining his adopted quirkily unusual accent at all times, remained in character when off screen, and wore Bill the Butcher’s threadbare coat, despite cold conditions during filming.”¹⁰⁷ Part of the fascination with these anecdotes is the fact that the actor seems so willing to put himself in harm’s way for the sake of a performance: rapidly gaining and losing weight, for instance, or enduring cold temperatures and refusing all ways to relieve that discomfort that would not have been available to the character, all with the goal of locking into that character’s lived experience. Similarly, the fact that this kind of commitment, particularly when the actor remains in character, necessarily isolates them from other people, whether it be co-stars who socialize normally when the camera is not rolling, or the actors’ own families. This desire to transform is what draws people in, regardless of the more nuanced reasons the actors may choose to do so, in anecdotal stories of “Method acting.” Enelow argues that “Method acting stands for a certain conception of acting as “becoming” [...], the total merger of actor and character, inciting both our discomfort around the possibility of inauthenticity, a disjuncture between the performed person and the real person, and our perhaps more primary fear of the opposite—of the total unity between the two.”¹⁰⁸

De Niro and Day-Lewis are able to invest so much time and energy into their characters because the production has made space for it; practically, it is not always possible for actors to be able to prepare and rehearse as much as they would want to and, more often than not, they have to adapt to the limited time afforded to them. While that is certainly the case in some respects, director Martin Scorsese chose to cast De Niro and Day-Lewis in his films because of how they approach their characters. Scorsese, who worked with John Cassavetes at the beginning of his career in the early 1970s, shares with him a comparable focus on collaboration in his filmmaking. Both De Niro and Day-Lewis have emphasized Scorsese’s collaborative way of working, and the fact that they are given the space to work as they see fit to achieve the best performance. His direction of *Raging Bull* was built around De Niro’s conception of the LaMotta character; LaMotta is the central figure of the film, and so the film is a showcase for De Niro’s performance choices. The actor was the one who initially brought the project to Scorsese, who had to be convinced to take it on. Even then, De Niro was the main person behind the project, supervising its development until principal

¹⁰⁵ Mark Binelli, “Daniel Day-Lewis Gets His Knives Out,” *Rolling Stone*, 6 March 2003, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/daniel-day-lewis-gets-his-knives-out-189914/>.

¹⁰⁶ Manufacturing Intellect, “Martin Scorsese and Daniel Day-Lewis interview on “Gangs of New York” (2002),” February 20, 2017, YouTube video, 46:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omZxAToHz74>.

¹⁰⁷ Jackson, *Daniel Day-Lewis: The Biography*, 260.

¹⁰⁸ Shonni Enelow, *Method Acting and Its Discontents* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015): 5.

photography.¹⁰⁹ The film is now chiefly regarded as the work of an auteur, in addition to being a case study in tour de force performance, but Tait argues that the title of auteur was never singular: “a more nuanced view of *Raging Bull* would claim that Scorsese, Schrader, De Niro, and [Thelma] Schoonmacher each possessed the auteur function at different times during the production.”¹¹⁰ It is interesting to note that in the decades since the film’s release, De Niro’s star has considerably fallen from where it was at the height of his career as he has accumulated more and more middling performances in even more middling films. Meanwhile, Scorsese’s body of work has only grown in appreciation, certainly from where it was following the critical and financial failure of *New York, New York* (1977). He has, since then, come to be considered one of the most important American filmmakers, and *Raging Bull* is heralded as one of his crowning achievements and has its place in the American film canon.

Though Day-Lewis was not as involved in the creation of *Gangs of New York* beyond his own performance as De Niro was in the creation of *Raging Bull*, what he brought to the character of Bill in his preparation and performance is equally a result of Scorsese’s collaborative approach to filmmaking. Day-Lewis has spoken of the fact that part of the reason he is very selective with the films he appears in is (that) he wants to be able to give himself entirely to the project, and therefore needs to believe in it enough to do so and be able to work with the director in a way that allows that to happen. Of his decision to accept Scorsese’s offer of the part in *Gangs of New York*, Day-Lewis said that “Partly for my own sake, but also for his, I wanted to know that if I went into this thing with him that I would be there wholeheartedly, for however long it took. And I would be an ally, not one of the naysayers. That would be true of any director I work with, but least of all I would wish to let him down.”¹¹¹ Scorsese proves to be a filmmaker who balances a strong style and directorial voice with allowing space for his lead actors to be the authors of their own performances, and in fact encouraging them to do so. Scorsese’s authorship of his films shines through, and yet they are never wholly his; he understands that the film is the result of how the work of many different key contributors, most visibly the actors, come together, and that it is virtually impossible for an individual to have total creative control in filmmaking, which is an inherently collaborative artform.¹¹²

Fascination

In the media coverage of both actors’ performances and specifically of their roles in these two films, there is an emphasis on how “painstaking” the research and process of becoming their characters is. Alternate conceptions of actors are ones who may approach performance instinctually and without needing such intense preparation, actors who don’t need complex processes of becoming their characters and who can simply turn it on and off at a moment’s notice. Or, even more simply, actors who are not willing to commit to their parts to such intense levels. Donna Peberdy argues that “we tend to see real performances as something not purposefully put together at all, being an unintentional product of the individual’s unselfconscious response to the facts in his situation. And contrived performances we tend to see as something painstakingly put

¹⁰⁹ Tait, “Robert De Niro’s *Raging Bull*,” 20.

¹¹⁰ Tait, 33.

¹¹¹ Ann Hornaday, “Urban Mythmaker,” *The Washington Post*, 18 December 2002.

¹¹² Perkins, “Direction and Authorship,” 70.

together, one false item on another.”¹¹³ Here she highlights the dilemma of authenticity in acting, which is inherently a form of labour, whether it is simple or complex. For example, non-actors or actors giving their debut performances and delivering something that feels genuine and effortless often receive much praise, with the common conclusion being that they sprung onto the film scene fully formed, perfectly suited to the role they play. They are exceptional because it is perceived that their skill is innate, that their performance comes naturally and has not been whittled down by training or experience. In short, the shine of their authenticity has been captured before it has had a chance to be sullied. On the other hand, Bell-Metereau and Glenn posit that “the spectacle of an actor’s suffering, both onscreen and in private, gives audiences a sense of the actor’s authenticity, and yet in order for the performance of suffering to accomplish its psychological goal of arousing and then displacing anxiety, it must come across as something hidden from view, beneath the obvious surface and artificiality of acting.”¹¹⁴ Here, authenticity is not signaled by raw talent, but rather by the effort poured into the role, effort that is either known by the audience ahead of time due to anecdotes circulated about the film’s production, or that can clearly be seen in the performance itself.¹¹⁵ Daniel Day-Lewis encapsulates this not only in how his acting is received but in how he approaches it as well, as Jim Sheridan has relayed: “[he] feels like he’s betraying himself spiritually if he doesn’t give it 100 percent. It’s not possible, the obliteration of the self, but he comes as close as anyone could.”¹¹⁶ As an actor well-known for rarely taking on roles and always seeking to let the character engulf him completely, Day-Lewis fits squarely into this latter model of authenticity. De Niro, with his much-publicized weight gain and training juxtaposed with the relative simplicity of the prosthetic nose he wore to more closely resemble LaMotta, fits into this model as well.

What fascinates is also the kind of character they are doing all of this to portray: in both cases, highly violent and volatile individuals. The violence of the real person being portrayed (LaMotta, who was alive and available to be studied, and William Poole, on whom Bill the Butcher is heavily based but who is only knowable through historical documents) gets filtered through the actor’s interpretation of them, and emerges in its final form in the performed character in the finished film. Were De Niro and Day-Lewis playing less explosive characters, ones who do not make use of showmanship and command attention, they would perhaps not be such heavily discussed cases of actors giving it their all; their extreme efforts could instead seem unwarranted and difficult to accept as being necessary. A question at the heart of all the fascination, one that has never received a satisfactory answer, is: where do they find the rage? How does one “become” a character defined by their violence without it clinging to them and changing them permanently, both as performers and simply as people?

Their performances are not necessarily what one might call realistic; Day-Lewis in particular plays the character of Bill with a lot of theatricalities, and De Niro’s portrayal of Jake LaMotta is very volatile, both in ways that may seem unrealistic to some. But both capture something real, which is that some people do behave in such extreme ways outside of the confines

¹¹³ Donna Peberdy, *Masculinity and Film Performance: Male Angst in Contemporary American Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 24-25.

¹¹⁴ Rebecca Bell-Metereau and Colleen Glenn, “Introduction,” in *Star Bodies and the Erotics of Suffering*, ed. Rebecca Bell-Metereau and Colleen Glenn (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 8.

¹¹⁵ There are of course no hard and fast rules in how performances are received; ingenues are often dismissed, and visible strain is sometimes derided as being embarrassing. They can be trying too hard, or not trying hard enough.

¹¹⁶ Lyall, “The Daniel Day-Lewis Method: A Kind of Vanishing Act.”

of narrative cinema; a realistic performance does not necessarily or automatically adhere to how the average person would act, nor does it equal a quiet, internal performance. Bingham points out that “theatricality,” as opposed to the naturalistic acting styles that are supposed to typify post-studio cinema and contemporary stage acting, is a charge that has followed the twenty-first-century Day-Lewis like a spotlight.”¹¹⁷ He argues that although the aim of the Stanislavski style of acting that Day-Lewis makes use of was realism, he has used it to portray people who are uniquely larger than life, especially compared to the other, more subdued characters they are surrounded with, as is the case in *Gangs of New York*. In the same way, De Niro’s LaMotta is defined by how he performs his masculinity with loud violence and displays of power over the people in his daily life.

De Niro and Day-Lewis turn acting into genuinely difficult and grueling work by committing to an intense degree, justified by the need to “earn the right to play a person,”¹¹⁸ as De Niro has said, or indeed to earn the right to be an actor at all. In an article on various actors that have fallen under the “Method” label, Hal Hinson asserts that De Niro’s weight gain for *Raging Bull* is defined by how literal it is, how lacking in imagination:

De Niro’s approach to character is reductive, almost ascetic; it’s not acting, it’s behaving. De Niro insists on preserving the mystery at the core of personality, and his reticence seems to indicate that to delineate anything other than a character’s exterior would be dishonest. His attitude suggests that the psychological pegs an actor uses to get a handle on a character are facile and even fraudulent—that acting is a lie.¹¹⁹

The same can be said of Day-Lewis, who has throughout his career expressed a similar discomfort with what he also calls the fraudulence at the heart of the acting profession, which is what pushes him to dig so deeply into his roles: “When pressed to analyze this compulsion, [Day-Lewis] has confessed that possibly it is a way of compensating for devoting his time and energy to doing something he has never quite been able to quantify the value of.”¹²⁰ Both actors throw themselves into their roles to such a degree in order to make up for the fact that acting, in their view, is relatively low-stakes as far as professions go, and that it is predicated on something false. The fact that they are playing characters that are based on real people, to varying degrees, provides a clear goal: their aim is to get as close to the real thing as possible, to so thoroughly become them that it is no longer performance but rather behaviour, and that audiences see them not as themselves but as a new version of that real person come to life.

De Niro and Day-Lewis are, of course, too famous to completely disappear, no matter how hard they try. This effort does not go over well with everyone; though many praise them for it, others argue that it overshadows the film completely. In her review of *Raging Bull*, Pauline Kael, who had in previous years praised most of De Niro’s performances, states that he “seems to have emptied himself out to become the part he’s playing and then not got enough material to refill himself with [...] He has so little expressive spark that what I found myself thinking of wasn’t La Motta [*sic*] or the movie but the metamorphosis of De Niro.”¹²¹ Interestingly, though it received

¹¹⁷ Bingham, “Broken Nose and All: Daniel Day-Lewis and the Performance of Disruption,” 103.

¹¹⁸ Levy, *Robert De Niro: A Life*, 140.

¹¹⁹ Hal Hinson, “Some Notes on Method Actors,” *Sight & Sound* 53, no. 3 (1984), 204.

¹²⁰ Jackson, *Daniel Day-Lewis: The Biography*, 233.

¹²¹ Pauline Kael, “Religious Pulp, or the Incredible Hulk,” *The New Yorker*, December 1980.

similar reactions, Day-Lewis's performance in *Gangs of New York* was treated as a curiosity at the center of the film's sprawl rather than something that took viewers out of the film entirely. Continuing from his previously cited review, A.O. Scott's assessment of the performance was that "For his part Mr. Day-Lewis positively luxuriates in his character's villainy and turns Bill's flavorsome dialogue into vernacular poetry. He understands the Shakespearian dimensions of the character and has enough art to fill them out."¹²² Because Day-Lewis's performance stands out among the rest, and because the scope of the film is so much wider and temporally further away from our own time, his performance ends up blending with the overall tone of the film. Regarding this, in a 2020 article looking back on the film, Elise Moore addresses the contemporary critical reaction to the performance, arguing that the actor's reputation had an important influence: "the one element of the film that even most of its detractors will defend is Daniel Day-Lewis's cartoon villain performance as Bill the Butcher. It tempts me to think that it's Day-Lewis's intimidating reputation as a British method genius that's causing this reaction, and not genuine sympathy for or ease with stylized performances."¹²³ Day-Lewis's training and history in the British theater and film scene make it so that his all-out commitment to a performance that is as far from poised as possible all the more impressive. Comparatively, De Niro's career leads up naturally to what he does in *Raging Bull*; he does not defy expectations, but rather works towards the logical conclusion of what he has done until that point. In both cases, the behind-the-scenes elements made widely known by the media coverage become inseparable from the performance itself, for better or worse.

A central component of how De Niro and Day-Lewis are framed by the media is how resistant they are to it. Both actors are intensely private and have shown themselves to be uncomfortable with interviews, preferring not to give them. Though they can be very well-spoken, they are often clearly uncomfortable with the questioning, whether it relates to their own lives or their work. The journalists themselves frequently draw attention to this and use it to construct their profiles, as when Barry Paris writes in 1989: "It's not fear but *reticence* that underlies De Niro's deep reluctance to speak of himself. [...] What the mythmakers have interpreted as "pathological secrecy" is really something simpler and less mysterious: Robert De Niro is just a profoundly nonverbal person."¹²⁴ Levy likens it to how Marlon Brando related to the press, preferring not to give too much away and generally remaining at a distance.¹²⁵ This is another point of fascination: the movie star who resists stardom, who clings to the opacity of his star persona. As a result, what interviews are available often tend to directly address this very reticence and frame it as a point of intrigue. Neither actor promotes himself as many other actors do, and both are arguably uninterested in the public aspects of stardom itself, thinking of themselves more exclusively as working actors and generally staying away from discussions of their personal lives. In this way, they attempt to break away from the construction of stardom, as Richard Dyer describes it as "obviously a case of appearance [...] the whole media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of "really"—what is [he] *really* like?"¹²⁶ Their efforts to distance themselves from the public eye both amplifies the mystique surrounding them, and makes it so that they are both known primarily through their roles. For De Niro, this led to a form of typecasting in the latter part of his career especially, due to the fact that he frequently played tough guys and increasingly leaned into

¹²² Scott, "To Feel A City Seethe."

¹²³ Moore, "Making America Strange Again."

¹²⁴ Barry Paris, "Maximum Expression," *American Film*, 1 October 1989.

¹²⁵ Levy, *Robert De Niro: A Life*, 4.

¹²⁶ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

that expectation. Day-Lewis's persona is much more elusive, as there is a much smaller body of work to pull from: "The seeming lack of continuity between one character and another, and especially between Day-Lewis's gentle, charming offscreen personality and his powerful performance, frustrates the continuity of a 'real person' whom spectators can feel they know."¹²⁷

This is in line with the way the actors construct their roles, which is by attempting to disappear into the character as thoroughly as possible, thereby trying to erase any semblance of themselves—or their star personas—from the film, appearing only as physical embodiments of Jake LaMotta and Bill the Butcher. This does, however, only draw even more fascination, as their reluctance to dissect their work can suggest something deeper and more unique than would be the case with actors who readily talk about their work. When interviews are granted, the questions become more pointed, trying to get at the heart of how and why they perform the way they do. For example, when Mark Binelli from *Rolling Stone* posed the question of whether Day-Lewis does in fact remain in character on set, the actor has already anticipated it and replied, "Well, the thing about it is... [sighs] People speak about these things because I guess they think it's strange. I don't know. It makes sense to me."¹²⁸ Part of his resistance to press, as is the case with De Niro as well, is a form of preservation: opening up about their methods and the way they work to achieve a performance detracts from the performance itself. By avoiding interviews, they can let the work speak for itself, rather than have to reduce it to brief and simple quote-worthy answers. This is perhaps paradoxical given how maximalist their performances are, as Enelow highlights: "Expressive acting [...] is built on the conviction that audiences want an actor's emotions to be in some way available to them. There's a basic optimism in that conviction: the optimism that the world would be better if we all told each other the truth about what we feel."¹²⁹ The characters of Jake LaMotta and Bill the Butcher are available to the audience in that they are explosive in their emotions, only briefly simmering under the surface before externalizing them in the form of rage. Though they are perhaps not expressing how they really feel, which Enelow posits is the ideal goal of expression, their rage shows glimpses of what that truth is.

Disappearing

Watching *Raging Bull* and *Gangs of New York* in the decades following their respective releases in theaters makes it clear that the principal component of each film is its biggest performance, in the theatrical sense, and that the film lives or dies on whether one finds that performance compelling. Robert De Niro and Daniel Day-Lewis were both famous and heavily praised actors before they took these roles and have only become more so in separate ways since then. These actors' stardom is dependent on the coverage of their films, the fascination with their working methods, and behind-the-scenes tidbits of their seemingly bizarre behaviors in the absence of more personal material. This makes the performances stand out all the more. It is clear that it is virtually impossible for them to disappear into the fabric of the film, despite their best efforts; we as their audience will always know it's them, if we have a modicum of knowledge about who they are as actors in the cultural landscape of American film.

¹²⁷ Bingham, "Broken Nose and All: Daniel Day-Lewis and the Performance of Disruption," 100.

¹²⁸ Binelli, "Daniel Day-Lewis Gets His Knives Out."

¹²⁹ Shonni Enelow, "The Great Recession," *Film Comment* 52, no. 5 (2016), 4.

Both have since moved away from this place in their careers. Following the release of *Phantom Thread* (2017), his second collaboration with director Paul Thomas Anderson, Daniel Day-Lewis announced his retirement from acting, stating: “All my life, I’ve mouthed off about how I should stop acting, and I don’t know why it was different this time, but the impulse to quit took root in me, and that became a compulsion. It was something I had to do.”¹³⁰ Given his reluctance to commit to films due to the intensity of the way he works, this can be seen as a way of getting out of the game while still at the top. For his part, De Niro slowly stopped putting as much work into his parts as he had during *Raging Bull*. For a long time, his performance as Max Cady in Scorsese’s *Cape Fear* (1992) was the last real gasp of such dedication, with most roles since then requiring much less of him.¹³¹ Even in 1984 this was apparent, with Hinson framing *Raging Bull* as the peak of the actor’s output: “De Niro has taken Stanislavski’s notion of becoming a character literally, and in his most recent films there are only vestigial traces of an actor’s performance in his work. Bloated and battle-scarred, as La Motta [*sic*], De Niro carried Brando’s realistic style to its logical extreme, to the point where the actor’s genius is in his transformation.”¹³² Without such transformation, then, his work is average by comparison.

De Niro and Day-Lewis’s work has shifted the cultural understanding of “Method Acting”. They are the most famous actors of their respective generations under the “Method” label, and the definition of what Method acting is has therefore become something entirely different from how it originated. Rather than referring to a specific set of practices as taught by a particular school of acting, “the vision of Method acting central to writing about film will continue to valorize emotion that emerges instinctively from actors’ bodies.”¹³³ Yet, as we have seen, this does not accurately represent the way these two actors who are supposedly emblematic of this style of acting truly work. I argue that what is commonly referred to as Method acting is now so broad as to be virtually meaningless, at times pointing to the specific practice of actors taking extreme measures to remain in character, and at other times more broadly gesturing to a style of acting that is perceived as being innate and effortless. In either case, the continued fascination with Method acting shows that audiences have only become more and more aware of performativity in its various forms, yet continue to seek evidence of true authenticity in performance.

¹³⁰ Erin Nyren, “Daniel Day-Lewis on Retirement From Acting: ‘The Impulse To Quit Took Root In Me’,” *Variety*, 28 Nov, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/daniel-day-lewis-retirement-from-acting-why-1202625443/>.

¹³¹ De Niro’s most recent widely praised performance was in Martin Scorsese’s *The Irishman* (2019). The film was heavily discussed in part due to its use of visual effects and CGI to achieve the de-aging effect necessary for its leads, all in their late 70s, to be able to play the same characters over a long period of time. As a result, the praise for De Niro’s performance did not rest in large part on his ability to transform himself physically as it did in *Raging Bull*.

¹³² Hinson, “Some Notes on Method Actors,” 200.

¹³³ Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke, “Capturing Natural Behavior on Film?” *Theatre Annual* 59: 101.

Chapter Three

“Crying Isn’t on the List”



Fig. 4 — Veronica Rawlings (Viola Davis) gathers herself before her husband’s funeral in Widows (2018).

Intersections

In recent years, Viola Davis’s name has come to dominate discussions of emotionally intense film performers. Having begun her career in small theater productions, she rose to Hollywood stardom through small roles in film and television before her pivotal role in *Doubt* (2008), which became her breakthrough performance. With consistent critical acclaim, she has since moved on to leading roles in films such as *The Help* (2011), *Fences* (2016), *Widows* (2018), and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (2020).¹³⁴ She has also become well-known for her starring role in the long-running television show *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-2020). As she has moved on to more complex and meatier roles, Davis’s tearful performance in *Doubt* still encapsulates much of what has made her such a fascinating and groundbreaking performer: her fusion of strength, vulnerability, and emotional intensity. This balance is one of her greatest talents, and with it comes a level of authenticity that demarcates itself from the kind examined in the previous case studies, most importantly due to her position in the industry as a dark-skinned Black female actor and star.

Davis’s success represents progress in the position of Black and African American actors in Hollywood, particularly when compared to how they were received by the media and audiences in the past. One such point of comparison would be Paul Robeson, one of the most famous Black performers in the first half of the 20th century, as when Francesca Sobande builds on Richard Dyer’s examination of Robeson’s crossover success and stardom. Dyer noted that his appeal to

¹³⁴ Viola Davis has been nominated for Academy Awards for all mentioned films except *Widows* and has won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for *Fences*.

both white and Black audiences was not in spite of his racial identity, but because of it: “Robeson was taken to embody a set of specifically black qualities—naturalness, primitiveness, simplicity and others—that were equally valued and similarly evoked, but for different reasons, by whites and blacks.”¹³⁵ When writing about Davis’s own positionality as a Black star in a predominantly white industry, Sobande argues that “although many white celebrities manoeuvre through a minutiae of media without being explicitly racialized, [...] a Black celebrity is rarely conceived of as being just a celebrity. [...] This is illustrated in the way judgements of famous Black women may relate to, and deviate from, those of famous white women.”¹³⁶ Indeed, Davis’s stardom has not depended on her conformity to the white hegemony of the film industry, but has instead broadened the range of representation for Blackness and Black femininity.

Overall, this thesis argues that intensity is a slippery albeit central aspect of modern cinematic performance, which defines the style of many film actors associated with arthouse and independent cinema, as well as dramatic genres in mainstream cinema in North America and internationally. Particularly in the US and in the North American context, this type of acting has been largely—though not exclusively—associated with the tradition of Method acting, both as it was developed by Strasberg’s Actors Studio and as its definition has shifted and become more nebulous in the decades since. A key component of intense performance is that it strives to produce authenticity in character portrayal through various means. Though intense performances are not always naturalistic, they do often aspire to produce a truthful or heartfelt rendition of a character or a situation through emotional outburst, catharsis, and physically grueling or transformative feats. Viola Davis is a significant example of a performer whose intense performances have been noted and praised without much scrutiny into the acting techniques with which she achieves them, contrary to previous case studies. Rather, the scope of interest in her approach to performance has largely concerned itself with what it means to authentically perform as a Black female actor in an industry, and more widely a culture, that has historically either shut such performers out entirely or relegated them to rigid and demeaning stereotypes, such as that of the maid.

I will be using Viola Davis as a case study and building upon writing by scholars like Francesca Sobande and Nancy Wang Yuen about her place in Hollywood as a performer and activist. In this position, Davis is an active force of disruption to the racist and misogynistic effects of Hollywood’s cultural hegemony, in which “dominant narratives of whites as heroes and actors of color as sidekicks or villains legitimate and reproduce the racial hierarchies existent in US society.”¹³⁷ I argue that a unique combination of vulnerability, strength, and emotional intensity has been crucial to Viola Davis’s rise to star status and the acclaim of her performances as authentic to the Black female experience in an American context, allowing her to transcend stereotypes of subservience or impenetrability, thereby expanding what is possible for Black female roles and performers. Davis uses her star status as a platform to advocate for better opportunities and work environments for other Black female actors in Hollywood, who face unique forms of racism and misogyny in the industry. Throughout her career as one of the most acclaimed and top-ranked African American female actors in Hollywood, she has fought for the opportunity to play authentically complex characters, and in turn foster the creation of such characters for other

¹³⁵ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 67.

¹³⁶ Francesca Sobande, “How to get away with authenticity: Viola Davis and the intersections of Blackness, naturalness, femininity and relatability,” *Celebrity Studies* 10, no. 3 (2019): 397.

¹³⁷ Nancy Wang Yuen, *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 7.

performers in order to counter the generalized stereotyping of racialized characters in the industry. She has done so by choosing her roles carefully and avoiding stereotyped and simplistic roles as soon as she was in a position in her career to be able to do so, as well as by speaking openly to media outlets about such issues of representation and lack of diversity that Black female actors continue to struggle against. Though Davis is not linked to any one school of acting, her unique approach to authenticity manifests itself in her performances at the emotional and physical level, as well as how she interacts with the media as a racialized individual.

I will provide an overview of her career, with a central focus on two of her most well-received films that will serve as case studies: *Fences* (2016), a historical family drama directed by and co-starring Denzel Washington and adapted from a play by August Wilson, and *Widows* (2018), a heist thriller directed by Steve McQueen and penned by novelist Gillian Flynn and McQueen. The study of these two films, with mentions of other films from her career, allows for an examination of the role of Black female actors in the US film industry and in Hollywood cinema in matters of film history as well as genre. In the first section, I will focus on Davis's commitment to authenticity in the realm of her film performances and unpack the relation I have marked out between vulnerability, strength, and emotional intensity, which I argue are essential to what she seeks to achieve. In addition, I will briefly touch on the physical aspects of her approach to authenticity, namely in how it involves the treatment of her natural hair texture, as well as a brief return to the question of weight gain in the name of verisimilitude when portraying historical characters. In the second section, I will move beyond the context of her acting choices and discuss Davis's push for greater opportunities and better—i.e., more complex and authentic—roles for Black female actors. Here, authenticity does not only refer to capturing the truth of an individual character, but also honoring the social, political, and cultural experience of Black women in an American context, which has been erased and shut out of Hollywood narratives for decades. Davis's advocacy for such change is achieved through her relationship with the media and her openness in discussing her choices of roles and how she approaches them, the wider lack of opportunities for actors who are like her but not at the same level of fame (and therefore privilege), the effects that mainstream Hollywood narratives involving Black women have on the perception and experience of women in real life, as well as issues outside of Hollywood, notably during the #MeToo movement. Examining Davis's relation to authenticity in both her performances and her interactions with the media as a star will allow her labour and the production of intensity that characterizes it to become apparent.

Authenticity in Performance

Viola Davis has not attached herself to a particular school of acting, and throughout her career she has avoided publicity stunts or splashy methods that are typically associated with intense and critically acclaimed performances. The inclusion of *Fences* as a case study is significant because it is a showcase of Davis's work throughout many years of her career, as it is adapted from a play that she has starred in before it was taken to the screen. As such, she was very familiar with the part of Rose Maxson, and for the film adaptation had the task of adjusting her performance in order to play for the camera rather than the back of the audience. The supposed opposition between stage and screen has been an important topic in discussions of performance throughout the history of cinema, as the language of the medium transforms the limits of what a good performance can

be. James Naremore points to the invention of the close-up as a dividing line between the theatrical and the cinematic, stating that “the first step in facilitating the change towards psychological realism was to shorten the distance between actors and camera.”¹³⁸ To bring the character of Rose from the stage to the screen, Viola Davis therefore had to readjust the intensity of her performance while keeping intact the delicate balance of vulnerability and strength necessary for the role. Though Baron and Carnicke have argued that “the stage-screen opposition has caused most writing about film to anchor film performance in almost anything other than actors’ labor and agency,”¹³⁹ I bring up Davis’s shift from stage to screen in order to frame it not as an opposition but as a work of adaptation in its own right, to highlight her labor and the essential role she plays in the coherent—and successful—translation of the play into a film.

Davis has discussed how she views the work she does, which is as an exercise in honesty and vulnerability requiring complete commitment to obtain a meaningful result. “I don’t see acting as hiding,” she states, “I see it as stepping up buck naked in front of a group of people that you don’t know. Every single time. It’s about exposing. If you’re not doing that, you’re basically not doing anything.”¹⁴⁰ In Davis’s own words there is an emphasis on the inherent difficulty of acting, particularly in the context of drama: to create a successful performance one must be enthusiastically willing to expose oneself and not hold back. Elsewhere, she has spoken of acting as a collaborative process—not just with the rest of the cast and crew, but with the audience as well: “I need...the audience to come locked and loaded with all their thoughts, with all their memories, and to be able to look at the person that I’m creating on the stage and see themselves. [...] And it is the most awesome way to feel empathy for another human being—to literally sit with them and to see them in their mess and their beauty.”¹⁴¹ Though she is speaking in the context of theatre, where the audience is in the room with the performer and is therefore able to experience their output in a format that is in some ways more directly impactful, her statements remain true in the context of her film performances.

These two statements encapsulate Davis’s conceptualization of how her work functions and succeeds, and she is echoed by the reception of her body of work and acting style by the media. The emotional intensity of her performances is what is most consistently highlighted in reviews, and she is often spoken of in extremes. For example, Odie Henderson appreciatively states in his review of *Fences* that “nobody cries onscreen like Davis [...] It’s so painful, it’s almost unwatchable.”¹⁴² In reviews of *Widows*, Davis’s emotional power as a leading woman is also brought to the forefront, as when A.O. Scott writes that the film works best “when Davis commands the screen with her inimitable blend of psychological subtlety and operatic intensity.”¹⁴³ What stands out about Viola Davis is that she is able not only to perform a wide spectrum of emotional turmoil and the constant negotiation of self-restraint and outburst, but to do

¹³⁸ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 38.

¹³⁹ Baron & Carnicke, “Capturing Natural Behavior on Film?” 90.

¹⁴⁰ John Lahr, “Viola Davis’s Call to Adventure,” *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/12/19/viola-davis-call-to-adventure>

¹⁴¹ Viola Davis quoted in Audie Cornish, “‘Authenticity is My Rebellion’: Viola Davis on ‘Widows,’ Steve McQueen and Legacy,” *NPR*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/16/668622764/authenticity-is-my-rebellion-viola-davis-on-widows-steve-mcqueen-and-legacy>

¹⁴² Odie Henderson, “Fences,” *RogerEbert.com*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fences-2016>

¹⁴³ A.O. Scott, “‘Widows’ Review: Viola Davis Commands the Screen in a Somber Heist Film,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/15/movies/widows-review.html>

so in roles that have room for such negotiation. Both Rose Maxson and Veronica Rawlings, her character in *Widows*, are women who must keep the depth of their suffering under control, presenting a facade that is either selflessly supportive or steely and practical, respectively. In both cases, Davis plays versions of necessary and self-preserving strength in the face of hardship and imminent danger.

Though Rose and Veronica inhabit considerably different realities in their respective narratives, they are both characters who are defined by the fact that they are Black women. It is an integral part of their identities as well as how they exist within their environments and interact with the other characters. Rose is a woman who has long resigned herself to her role of housewife to a man with a bruised ego, a woman whose existence revolves around maintaining harmony in her household, and who eventually reaches her breaking point when her husband Troy's confession of betrayal reveals how much he has undervalued her. In her analysis of the original play in the context of August Wilson's body of work, Sandra G. Shannon argues that Rose represents the epitome of self-sacrifice: "the cost for doing this has been to neglect her own individuality and to allow herself to be subsumed under her love for Troy and the family."¹⁴⁴ Conversely, the character of Veronica in *Widows* is one who is, due to her wealth, able to be as self-serving and as rude as she would like to be, yet still beholden to how her Black womanhood determines her position in society. She is routinely underestimated by the men she and the team of other widows she has assembled plan to rob, and she uses that to her advantage. Her relationships with the other widows are built on a shared grief, yet still contain tensions related to race, as when they all meet for the first time and Alice (Elizabeth Debicki) and Linda (Michelle Rodriguez) express surprise that the wife of the dead leader of their bank robber husbands is the Black woman standing in front of them. William J. Simmons describes Veronica as a character who is defined by the awareness she must have of her positionality: "She knows perhaps that the genre she inhabits has relegated black women (in a way very different than white women or black men) to a state of unintelligibility that precludes her from being either a *femme fatale* we fear or a heroine with which we identify—indeed a woman at all."¹⁴⁵

Simmons's conception of Veronica as a character aware of the genre of film she is in bridges the gap between character and actor; following his line of thought, I argue that Davis herself must remain aware of how she is received by the audiences of whatever genre of film she is in at any given moment. Indeed, the director Steve McQueen, whose background as an acclaimed multimedia artist and arthouse director makes *Widows* his first step into Hollywood genre fare, leans into the complexities of how Davis plays as the lead of the film: "I loved the idea that these women could be on-screen and be women," he said to *Vanity Fair*, "Not an idea of a woman, but they could be women. [...] Because I think that sort of black woman is often seen as masculine, or nonsexual, or as a savior."¹⁴⁶ Rose and Veronica are not only to be considered as Black women within their own narratives but as characters portrayed by a Black woman, who must go above and beyond in order to be afforded empathy and connect with general audiences on any similar level to white actors in similar roles. I turn here to how André Seewood conceptualizes the Racial

¹⁴⁴ Sandra G. Shannon, "The Fences They Build: August Wilson's Depiction of African-American Women," *Obsidian II* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 3.

¹⁴⁵ William J. Simmons, "On affect and criticality in Steve McQueen's *Widows*," *Jump Cut* no. 59 (Fall 2019).

¹⁴⁶ Nicole Sperling, "Director Steve McQueen Goes from Art House to Multiplex with Heist Thriller *Widows*," *Vanity Fair*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/11/widows-director-steve-mcqueen-interview>

Empathy Gap in the context of white audiences' reception of Black films: "A vast majority of White people don't like Black movies because they lack the empathy necessary to identify with Black characters which in turn affects their ability to 'suspend disbelief' and surrender to the narrative of a Black film."¹⁴⁷ I argue that the Racial Empathy Gap affects not only audience reception of narratives and films as whole works, but to the elements that those films are composed of as well, namely their performances. If Viola Davis has received mainstream acclaim and become a Hollywood star, it is because she has been able to cross cultural boundaries and deliver performances that are well received and lauded across the board, rather than mainly with Black audiences. I link this back to the fact that what is most often highlighted in her performances in *Fences* and *Widows*, among others, is the way she simultaneously performs emotional suffering and exudes strength, which demarcates her from her co-stars due to the intensity of both of those elements. This is not to say that Davis plays for white audiences specifically, or that they are the audience she has in mind when making films. Rather, I use the concept of a cross-over star as Dyer used it to write about Robeson's career, adapting it from its original usage in the context of pop music: "while having this wider appeal, they are still rooted in the particular musical subculture that defines them—in crossing over, they don't lose their original following."¹⁴⁸ Over the years, Davis has made it clear that she seeks not to assimilate into the roles that had already existed for Black women in Hollywood, but to push for a wider scope of roles and more authentic portrayals of Black womanhood in mainstream Hollywood films. "At this point," states Sonia Saraiya in a profile of Davis, "with a production company of her own, Davis knows she can find work. What concerns her are the Black actresses who are younger and fighting not to be invisible—the earlier versions of who she was."¹⁴⁹ In this sense, by doing the work she does and making a point to choose roles that are both complex enough to rise above stereotype and specific enough that they authentically speak to the Black female experience, she is directly interpellating Black audiences.

A crucial way that Davis has approached the question of authenticity in performance as a Black woman is in how she embodies her characters in a physical sense. Standards for Black women in Hollywood cinema have always been restrictive and inextricably tied to the dominant white beauty standard for women, which is reflective of American society at large. Sobande states that "celebrities function as symbolic resources, resulting in spectators negotiating conventions concerning identity. Examples of this include how 'female celebrities are used to determine normative femininity (Kanai 2015, p.322),' as well as how famous women whose physical appearance contrasts with such normative ideals, may be subject to ridicule."¹⁵⁰ Though Sobande is speaking here in a general sense to the standards that female celebrities are held to, she is writing in the context of Davis's star image at the intersection of authenticity, Blackness, and femininity. As a dark-skinned Black woman who has made the decision to wear her hair in its natural textured state, Davis represents a shift away from the normative—i.e., white—femininity described by Sobande.

The question of Davis's hair texture has been one of the main points of discussion in the media in regard to her commitment to authenticity. In an effort to come closer to a realistic

¹⁴⁷ André Seewood, "Why White People Don't Like Black Movies," *IndieWire*, January 17, 2014, <https://www.indiewire.com/2014/01/why-white-people-dont-like-black-movies-162548/>

¹⁴⁸ Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 64.

¹⁴⁹ Sonia Saraiya, "Viola Davis: 'My Entire Life Has Been a Protest'," *Vanity Fair*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/07/cover-story-viola-davis>

¹⁵⁰ Sobande, "How to get away with authenticity," 400.

portrayal of her characters, as opposed to most Black women in Hollywood who have had to conform to mainstream white beauty standards of hair with the help of wigs, relaxers, or other methods of achieving hair texture that is closer to the white beauty standard, Davis has chosen to wear her naturally coiled hair during public appearances, as well as on screen in movies and television. This first gained media attention during the awards season of 2012, particularly when she opted not to wear a wig at the Academy Awards, as she had for occasions in the past. When asked about it, she stated that there previously “[hadn’t] been any occasion that I felt brave enough to do it.”¹⁵¹ This decision was heavily scrutinized and received both praise and criticism, as when media personality Wendy Williams, who is also a Black woman, commented that wearing natural hair was not formal enough for such an event.¹⁵² In her book *The Politics of Black Women’s Hair*, Althea Prince has argued that the push against natural hair “manipulates many Black women, and Black people in general, to conform to the hegemony in which they live. Thus, many of them push themselves, their daughters, and others around them to live within, accept, and internalize definitions of what is beautiful hair.”¹⁵³ In 2014, Davis again made headlines when, on an early episode of *How to Get Away with Murder*, her character Annalise Keating is shown in an emotional scene in which she methodically wipes away her makeup and then removes her straight-haired wig, revealing her short natural hair. Of this decision, Davis has said: “I was so adamant about it. I said, listen, she can’t go to bed with her wig on. She cannot be in that bedroom with a wig on, because women don’t go to bed with their wigs on. And I said, ‘a whole portion of women out there are marginalized. I want to be a real woman.’ Let’s go for it; I’m a character actress!”¹⁵⁴ The decision to have her character go through the process of removing these markers of hegemonic beauty and revealing herself to the camera has a different effect than if she simply wore her natural hair in a scene in which that was not the main focus; by revealing her natural hair on camera in a scene characterized by Annalise’s emotional turmoil, Davis creates a link between authenticity and vulnerability.¹⁵⁵ Though she does not always wear her hair natural in her film and television roles, it is something that she has returned to once the barrier had been broken. She wore her hair natural in her portrayal of Veronica in *Widows* and was encouraged to do so by writer-director Steve McQueen, who explained that “Veronica is a wash-and-go kind of girl.”¹⁵⁶ As a result, according to Davis, the film became another work in which Black women could see themselves represented with a rare degree of realism.¹⁵⁷

Davis’s commitment to authenticity in a physical sense goes beyond the importance of her hair. It ventures into territory touched on in the previous chapter, which is that of bodily transformation in the form of weight gain to portray a real person more accurately in a fictionalized account of their life. Following in the tradition of Robert De Niro’s transformation for *Raging Bull*, Davis gained a considerable amount of weight for her performance in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*,

¹⁵¹ Katherine Boyle, “Viola Davis ditches wig at the Oscars,” *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/celebrityology/post/viola-davis-ditches-wig-at-the-oscars/2012/02/26/gIQAzEhccR_blog.html

¹⁵² Kristin Denise Rowe, “‘Nothing Else Mattered After the Wig Came Off’: Black Women, Unstyled Hair, and Scenes of Interiority,” *The Journal of American Culture* 42, no. 1 (2019): 24.

¹⁵³ Althea Prince, *The Politics of Black Women’s Hair* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2009), 112.

¹⁵⁴ TheEllenShow, “Viola Davis on ‘How to Get Away with Murder’,” YouTube video, 3:46, November 14, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tbZHkM1KMB0>

¹⁵⁵ Rowe, “‘Nothing Else Mattered After the Wig Came Off,’” 27.

¹⁵⁶ Leah Prinzevalli, “Viola Davis Says Her Short, Natural Hair in *Widows* Is More Than a Style Choice,” *Allure*, September 5, 2018, <https://www.allure.com/story/viola-davis-natural-hair-widows>

¹⁵⁷ Prinzevalli, “Viola Davis Says Her Short, Natural Hair in *Widows* Is More Than a Style Choice.”

and in talking about that decision she again explained it as a necessary step for an authentic performance: “[Rainey] was 300 pounds. In Hollywood, that’s a lot...Everybody wants to be pretty, so they’ll say, Ooh, I don’t want to be 300 pounds, can we just ignore that? In my opinion—no. If they say she’s 300 pounds, you have to be 300 pounds, or else you’re not honoring her.”¹⁵⁸ Though this decision was not heavily publicized, it remains an example of how Davis seeks to embody her characters by prioritizing an authentic portrayal of their complex personalities, intense emotions, and physical attributes to the best of her abilities. By doing so as a movie star of her caliber, she broadens the scope of what kind of people get represented in mainstream Hollywood films.

Authenticity Offscreen

Viola Davis’s approach to authenticity through vulnerability, strength, and emotional intensity is not solely relegated to her onscreen performances. It also defines her relationship to the media and how she frames her choices, whether they be in the context of a particular film or her career trajectory. As opposed to the case studies addressed in the previous chapter, who give very little public appearances or interviews in an effort to retain a level of privacy and discourage further in-depth scrutiny into their working methods, Davis frequently appears on press tours and gives numerous interviews. She does so both to further her career and to speak out about issues that concern her, including the representation of Black women in the film industry (both in front of and behind the camera), the state of diversity in what types of roles are available to Black women, as well as the issue of sexual harassment, which extends beyond the sphere of Hollywood.

The question of representation in Hollywood is not only relevant in terms of the demographic makeup of any given film, but also in terms of who is given the opportunity to embody a complex character. In other words, within a cast that is racially diverse, are the characters portrayed by actors of colour given the same level of importance, interiority, and quality of writing as their white co-stars? As Davis herself has stated, “The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there.”¹⁵⁹ At the beginning of her film career, she frequently played characters that embodied stereotypes that have long existed for Black women in Hollywood films. For example, one of her breakout roles is that of Aibileen Clark in Tate Taylor’s *The Help* (2011), adapted from Kathryn Stockett’s novel of the same name. The film is set in 1960s Mississippi. Aibileen, the maid of a wealthy socialite, is ostensibly the central focus of the narrative, but by the end of the film it is clear that the point of view that prevails is that of Skeeter (Emma Stone), a white woman and aspiring writer who writes a book from the perspective of the Black maids. In 2018, seven years after the release of the film, Davis expressed regret at having taken the role, stating: “I just felt that at the end of the day it wasn’t the voices of the maids that were heard.”¹⁶⁰ Indeed, despite its initial success, *The Help* has been regarded as a quintessential white savior narrative, defined by Mathew Hughey as

¹⁵⁸ Davis quoted in Saraiya, “Viola Davis: ‘My Entire Life Has Been a Protest’.”

¹⁵⁹ Viola Davis quoted in Joanna Rothkopf, “Watch Viola Davis’s Speech as First Woman of Color to Win ‘Outstanding Actress’ Emmy,” *Jezebel*, September 20, 2015, <https://jezebel.com/watch-viola-daviss-speech-as-first-woman-of-color-to-wi-1732006898>

¹⁶⁰ Viola Davis quoted in *The New York Times*, “Viola Davis on What ‘The Help’ Got Wrong and How She Proves Herself,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2018.

one in which “a White person (the savior) enters the milieu and through their sacrifices [...] is able to physically save—or at least morally redeem—the person or community of folks of color, by the film's end.”¹⁶¹ By sidelining the character of Aibileen and consequently limiting the scope of what Davis is able to bring to the role, *The Help* ends up perpetuating the stereotypes of Black women that it seeks to break. In her study of various African American actresses of the studio era, Charlene Regester notes that Black female characters were often intrinsically tied to white protagonists and as such denied interiority and individuality: “typically cast in a minor role and usually as a maid/subservient, mammy, matriarch, or hypersexualized woman, [the Black actress] remained an indistinct figure, a shadow, in a film’s background. By contrast with the leading white character, she was form without substance.”¹⁶² These stereotypes outlined by Regester are indeed heavily entrenched in Hollywood film history and are rigid categories that Black female performers have only been able to start breaking out of in the last few decades. In addition, new stereotypes have emerged, creating the illusion of more complex and diverse roles becoming available while remaining functionally the same as their precursors. In discussing the roles she has taken throughout her career, Davis has noted as much: “I’ve played many best friends, crack-addicted mothers, next-door neighbors, or professionals with no personal lives. There’s a limitation to how we are seen.”¹⁶³ The more established she became as an actor and star, the more she worked to create deeper and more complex roles for both herself and others, partly through her production company JuVee Productions and more generally through her advocacy for it via media outlets. It is important to highlight that the platform which allows her to discuss these issues in her industry is not one she has always had, but rather one that she has only had access to once her career was more established and she was more universally considered a star. As previously mentioned, the fact that she has the experience of playing shallow and stereotyped roles is not necessarily by choice, but because those were the roles that were available to her before her current level of fame which afforded her the ability to be more selective.

When it was released in 2018, *Widows* represented for many a significant step in the right direction in terms of its diverse cast of characters. Not only did it spotlight women with vastly different experiences and their relation to each other, but it did so in a unique combination of genres, as Simmons notes in his analysis of the film: “What characterizes *Widows* in addition to its revolutionary attention to non-white male stories is an interest in allowing those stories to be told through visual pleasure and through at times irrational emotional configurations afforded by melodrama and *film noir*.”¹⁶⁴ Just as it is often not enough to cast actors of colour in roles that do not account for how their racial identity would affect their place in the narrative and in relation to the other characters, what demarcates *Widows* from other heist thrillers is how it blends in other genres that are more generally associated with women, such as the melodrama, in order to make space for the inner lives of its central characters. The film’s diverse cast of characters led by Davis’s Veronica has been a central talking point in how it has been received, both in its melding of genres and how it sets an example: “diversity isn’t an opportunity for showy tokenism or liberal pieties. It’s a matter-of-fact reflection of a city’s seething internal dynamics, an opportunity to probe inequities of race, class, and gender that few American movies, let alone American genre

¹⁶¹ Matthew W. Hughey, “The Whiteness of Oscar Night,” *Contexts: Sociology for the Public*, January 19, 2015, <https://contexts.org/blog/the-whiteness-of-oscar-night/>

¹⁶² Charlene Regester, *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900-1960* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁶³ John Lahr, “Viola Davis’s Call to Adventure.”

¹⁶⁴ Simmons, “On affect and criticality in Steve McQueen’s *Widows*.”

movies, ever attempt to address.”¹⁶⁵ One notable way in which it showcases diversity and strengthens it by grounding it in reality is its depiction of an interracial relationship between Veronica and her husband Harry, portrayed by Liam Neeson. The film opens on a close-up of the married couple in bed, and Davis correctly pointed it out as a rare occurrence in cinema: “For me, this is something you’ll not see this year, last year, the year before that... That is, a dark-skinned woman of colour, at 53 years old, kissing Liam Neeson. Not just kissing a white man... Liam Neeson, a hunk. And kissing him sexually, romantically.”¹⁶⁶ Following the dissolution of the Production Code, which explicitly forbade depictions of miscegenation in the cinema and reflected anti-miscegenation laws in place throughout the country, it was nonetheless vanishingly rare to see such relationships not only shown in mainstream Hollywood films but centered in the way that it is in *Widows*. Veronica and Harry have lost their only son in a police shooting, and this adds a new layer to Veronica’s grief when it is revealed later on in the film that Harry has not only faked his death, but started a new family with a white woman, effectively divesting himself from any association with the realities of Veronica’s Blackness (“I couldn’t save him,” he tearfully justifies, “I couldn’t save us. I had to save *me*.”) When he finally reveals himself to her during the film’s climax, she is crying; when she shoots him in self-defense, she wrestles control of her life back from him.

The film is a prime example of how Black women can be represented in mainstream narratives and popular genres without being whitewashed or inherently losing anything; rather, a Black female character like Veronica contends with the realities of how she moves through a racist and misogynistic society and makes use of how that society, down to the people closest to her, underestimates her. Veronica is characterized by her strength and authority as the leader of the group of widows, but also by how she works through her grief (Fig. 4) and, eventually, overcomes it. In a sense, *Widows* represents a culmination of what Davis has been advocating for and working towards in her own career, as when she stated in an interview with *The Guardian* that “the one thing missing in cinema is that regular Black woman. Not anyone didactic, or whose sole purpose in the narrative is to illustrate some social abnormality. There’s no meaning behind it, other than she is just *there*.”¹⁶⁷ McQueen’s film, arguably even more than Washington’s adaptation of *Fences*, is a film in which a Black woman is given the space to be fully rounded and independent, without relinquishing neither the strength it has taken to get there, nor the humanity found in her vulnerability.

The critical reception of *Widows*, and particularly Davis’s position as its star, is another key factor of its success. Many accurately pointed out its uniqueness in the treatment of women in the context of a heist thriller but, consequently, there was confusion about how exactly to categorize the film, to break down its complexities into more digestible and familiar lines: is it primarily *about* race and/or gender? Does its attention to those structures that its lead characters are inherently affected by necessarily mean that they are the film’s primary concern, casting the

¹⁶⁵ Justin Chang, “Justin Chang’s festival diary: Steve McQueen’s ‘Widows’ blurs genre and politics into a corrosive cocktail.” *The Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-tiff-2018-toronto-film-festival-updates-htmlstory.html#justin-changs-festival-diary-steve-mcqueens-widows-blurs-genre-and-politics-into-a-corrosive-cocktail>

¹⁶⁶ Viola Davis quoted in Benjamin Lee, “Viola Davis: ‘I stifled who I was to be seen as pretty. I lost years,’” *The Guardian*, October 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/oct/20/viola-davis-stifled-who-was-lost-years-the-help>

¹⁶⁷ Davis quoted in Lee.

rest of its narrative into the background? As Simmons writes, “in considering the discourse surrounding *Widows*, it appears that the value of non-white and/or non-male imaginaries becomes dependent on their ability to deliver an unexpected plot or to allow us to unearth social commentary that critiques the conventions of genre or histories of representation. Put another way, identity is only legible in the reception of *Widows* as a disruptive, oppositional force.”¹⁶⁸ For some, such as *The New Yorker*’s Richard Brody, the film fails to deliver an entertaining heist film due to its consistent attention to the politics that underlie every relationship and decision taken by its characters, as well as the seriousness with which it delivers its narrative: “the carefully calibrated restraint that arises from McQueen’s earnest and sententious direction seals out the psychological implications of the stifled melodrama.”¹⁶⁹ Brody’s reception of the film is limited by an expectation of it to fit neatly into one genre by following the set of conventions that define it; but by honouring the diversity of its cast, *Widows* manages to not only exist outside the rigidity of genre conventions, but expand them.

Beyond the scope of her projects, Davis openly talks about her life, past, and her views on acting, as well as reflecting on her career; she cannot necessarily afford to be aloof, as her public persona is integral to her continued success as a star. Rather than remaining apolitical and detached, she approaches fame through a political lens by openly discussing the changes she wants to see and help bring forth in the industry, despite the set of difficulties that comes with this. In a *New York Times* interview in 2018, she admitted: “The responsibility of feeling like I am the great Black female hope for women of color has been a real professional challenge. Being that role model and picking up that baton when you’re struggling in your own life has been difficult. Looking at the deficit and seeing that once you’re on top, you can either take the role of leadership or you can toss it in the garbage and say, ‘I’m just out to save myself.’ I choose to be the leader.”¹⁷⁰ Sobande frames this as integral to her star persona and her position in Hollywood as one of the most well-known and successful Black actors working today: “In addition to appearing to be transparent about the internal and external critique that she has experienced throughout the course of her career as a dark-skinned Black woman, Davis actively embraces opportunities to speak about the work that remains to be done in terms of remedying the racism and sexism that courses through the veins of various celebrity settings.”¹⁷¹

Lastly, she uses her platform to speak out about issues outside of Hollywood, which affect her as a Black woman. One such issue is that of sexual harassment and assault, which she was vocal about before and during the rise of the #MeToo movement, which became more mainstream in 2017. Rosanna Maule outlines the origins of the movement with civil rights activist Tarana Burke, who “founded ‘me too.’ in 2006 to help survivors of sexual abuse overcoming their trauma through the force of empathy and community based support. [...] Burke’s movement has maintained its inclusionary mission, in spite of the mainstream trend it has undergone since its shift to social media and transformation into a transnational movement of protest.”¹⁷² Having

¹⁶⁸ Simmons, “On affect and criticality in Steve McQueen’s *Widows*.”

¹⁶⁹ Richard Brody, “‘Widows,’ Reviewed: Steve McQueen Grafts Politics Onto a Heist Film,” *The New Yorker*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/oct/20/viola-davis-stifled-who-was-lost-years-the-help>

¹⁷⁰ Viola Davis quoted in *The New York Times*, “Viola Davis on what ‘The Help’ Got Wrong and How She Proves Herself.”

¹⁷¹ Sobande, “How to get away with authenticity,” 403.

¹⁷² Rosanna Maule, “‘Not just a movement for famous white cisgendered women:’ #Me Too and intersectionality,” Abstract, *Gender and Women’s Studies* 2(3), no. 4 (2020): 1.

worked with UCLA's Rape Treatment Center and The Rape Foundation's Stuart House, as well as shared her own experiences in order to bring further awareness to how prevalent the issue continues to be, Davis has also worked towards widening the scope of the movement to include women outside of Hollywood, bringing it back to its original goal of addressing systemic issues that go beyond the power dynamics of the Hollywood industry.¹⁷³ Similarly, during the Black Lives Matters protests, Davis was equally as vocal. She and her friends and family demonstrated in their Los Angeles neighbourhood, and she later shared it on her Instagram account with the caption, "My rage and pain, like many Black Americans is rooted in the depth of my soul. Too many years of being asked to numb it, has caused it to implode [...] We will no longer be silent when we are being erased..."¹⁷⁴ In these cases the question of emotional intensity is important to bring up not as an attribute of her performance style but as a register in which she communicates with the public; she refuses to be flippant or dismissive about issues of sexism and racism, which affect her and others like her who do not have the same kind of platform that she does. For Davis, then, the work of authenticity is not only in the continuous process of being oneself in an industry built to suppress one's identity, but in being transparent and open about that process in order to facilitate a dialogue and set a precedent.

Balancing Acts

Much of the writing about Viola Davis has positioned her as a revelation, as something new in cinema. This is because she is able not only to perform a wide spectrum of emotional intensity, but to do it in roles that have room for such a spectrum. Since her rise to a star status which has allowed her to choose roles in which her labour and skill set as a dramatic actor are given space to flourish, she has come to represent unapologetic Black womanhood in Hollywood. Sobande distills this down to a question of resistance to conformity: "perceptions of [Davis's] authenticity may be linked to notions of conforming (or not) to normative ideas about the embodiment and on-screen depiction of Black women, as well as her embracing of 'race as an explicit theme in the narrative' (Hamilton 2014, p.52)—a theme that Davis projects when speaking about herself."¹⁷⁵ I would add that Davis projects this notion of nonconformity, meaning her public embracing of Black womanhood, not only in how she speaks about and presents herself, but in how she creates a narrative with her choice of roles and her performances as well.

Davis's association with intense emotionality has not come to overpower her strength and the strength of her characters, but rather it has added another layer to what being a strong Black woman can mean. In films like *Fences* and *Widows*, vulnerability does not negate strength, which is a level of complexity that has rarely been afforded to Black women throughout Hollywood history, and indeed in society at large. As Regester notes in her analysis of John M. Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934) and its juxtaposition of whiteness and Blackness: "Blackness is constructed to imply an absence of feelings or emotions; in those instances in the film when the black characters experience pain or suffering, they are accorded the least amount of

¹⁷³ Margeaux Sippell, "Viola Davis Wants #MeToo to Go Beyond Hollywood," *Variety*, <https://variety.com/video/viola-davis-metoo-times-up/>

¹⁷⁴ Viola Davis (@violadavis), "The above was my elixir..." *Instagram*, June 5, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CBC3_pLhM0i/?igshid=qlway60lq2c8

¹⁷⁵ Sobande, "How to get away with authenticity," 402.

compassion.”¹⁷⁶ In the case of Black womanhood, this has meant that expressions of pain or suffering have needed to be more intense in order to draw any level of compassion and identification comparable to how white performers are received. What Davis has achieved through her labor as a dramatic actor and outspoken star is the creation of space in which Black women’s stories can be told without compromise.

¹⁷⁶ Register, *African American Actresses*, 118.

Conclusion **Histories of Intensity**

Cultural fascination with the ins and outs of acting is nothing new. Yet the medium of film has turned performance into a different beast, immortalizing it in a form that can be reproduced en masse and therefore rewatched, experienced by continuously renewing audiences even after the moment itself has passed. Film, and more specifically the Hollywood film industry, has also transformed how performance and performers become stars and are subsequently written about as stars, from the early days of film fan magazines to today's cultural landscape dominated by social media. Despite the shift in culture and technology, a consistent point of interest has been the nebulous line of separation between actor and character. Of this, Naremore writes: "Ironically, the Hollywood star system and most of the other media strive to make obvious theatrical eccentricity seem invisible; the star's image is a valuable commodity, affecting her or his every public appearance, so that popular actors seem to become the figures they play, shading their fictional behavior into their celebrity appearances."¹⁷⁷ Throughout this thesis I have argued that in many cases, the star's theatrical eccentricity has on the contrary been folded into their star image, to the point where it becomes a core tenet of that image—sometimes, as in the case of Daniel Day-Lewis, despite their best efforts.

Criticism of narrative film can never be objective, as it inherently relies on the opinion of the viewer, and among other things is tied up in the viewer's suspension of disbelief. To be drawn into a narrative, one must be convinced on some level by those performing it. When dramatic performance is viewed through the lens of realism or believability, the subjectivity at hand becomes all the more pronounced; as I have returned to throughout this thesis, in many instances performances of violence, grief, or trauma are thought to be too theatrical, too excessive and therefore too embarrassing to witness. In cases like these, the line between drama and melodrama is one that is to be crossed at the film's own peril, and as such any outburst of emotion is in danger of being considered something that could only happen in the realm of fiction, a distorted reflection of reality. For some, on the other hand, this excess of intensity is itself a marker of the realism necessary for the dramatic narrative to be taken seriously—an actor's performance is gauged by how thoroughly it consumes them. This is where the question of transformation arises, and dramatic performance begins to envelop the realm of the physical. By molding their body to a role, actors can show just how thoroughly they are committed to the project, and therefore just how *real* their performance is. The danger of taking such transformation too far is itself part of the fascination. Overall, the cultural reception of intense dramatic performance hinges on how much we believe the suffering and rage that is being presented to us. Some revel in it, taking it as a display of talent and endurance; others are concerned by it and what it means for performances to come, and the safety of the actors in question as well as those around them. For the actors themselves, it is often much more banal than that; it is simply the best way they have found to do the work. Each actor has their own set of working methods, and each case I have covered throughout this thesis is one in which an actor has come to represent a form of intensity deemed exemplary.

¹⁷⁷ Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, 235.

In my first chapter, I sought to disentangle Gena Rowlands's acting work from the narratives that have solidified around it and have, consequently, erased much of the invaluable contributions she has made to the films she starred in. Her legacy is tied to Cassavetes, with her contributions to the films she starred in being folded into the grander auteurist narrative of his career, resulting in a general misunderstanding of her labour as well as an over-simplification of Cassavetes's own working methods. Additionally, the flattening of her intense performances into the nebulous categorization of "Method Acting" parallels the misunderstanding of Cassavetes's distinct filmmaking style as one dominated by spontaneous improvisation. I have argued for a renewed focus on Rowlands herself and the work she has been able to do in spaces prioritizing collaboration and actors' input, particularly in *Opening Night*, which is itself an exploration of how female actors can be boxed in and stripped of agency to the point of oblivion. In the spirit of *Opening Night*'s depiction of an actor fighting for her creative decisions and her freedom from an industry's oppressive misogyny through a renewed focus on the living performer over the static words on the page, I have worked to make space for Rowlands herself.

In my second chapter, I turned to the figure of the intensely committed male star, which has had a long legacy that continues to inform how star performances are marketed and received. Robert De Niro and Daniel Day-Lewis have become central figures in the actorly quest for a complete fusion with one's character as a way of achieving a true level of authentic portrayal and are considered points of reference in recent film history for the phenomenon of male actors giving themselves over to a role, often to the point of spectacle. The actors' much-publicized methods of performance-building for their respective entries in Scorsese's filmography, in which they portray real men whose legacies are defined by their violence, have bled into the cultural perception of their star personas. Yet their resistance to that perception, and indeed to the publicization of their working methods, has remained consistent throughout their careers, and I have shown how their working methods have been efforts to legitimize the act of performing itself, turning it into labour that is visibly and tangibly worked for. The reception of their career-defining works has further diluted what "Method acting" is understood to be and how the term is used as a shorthand for elaborately studied intense performances.

Finally, the third chapter demonstrates how Viola Davis has presented an alternate way of thinking about authenticity. The critical acclaim Davis has received, particularly her starring roles in *Fences* and *Widows*, has largely praised the emotional intensity of her performances, but more specifically the complexity of the emotions in question. To break free from the mold of racist stereotype that Black actors have historically been relegated to, Davis has sought out roles that showcase a range of emotion and ways of being, marrying strength and vulnerability and allowing for Black women to exist outside of the hegemonic white standard. She has done so by using her star power to be more selective with the roles she chooses, and to make changes to those roles by introducing character-building elements that authentically speak to the Black female experience, like wearing her hair with its natural texture. By doing so, I have argued that she has worked to bring more layered and resonant portrayals of Black women to the Hollywood film industry, as well as more opportunities behind the scenes that would make such portrayals possible.

This thesis has its roots in numerous cases I have observed over the years and which are ripe for further study. There are countless articles listing actors who have gone too far for a role, compiling instances of bodily transformation, injury, eccentric behaviour, and psychological breakdowns, some being on purpose and others accidental. A case I kept coming back to was

Shelley Duvall's performance in Stanley Kubrick's horror film *The Shining* (1980), in which she plays the abused wife of an increasingly erratic alcoholic. Duvall's performance was badly received at the time, but has since mostly been discussed in the context of the film's troubled production, where Kubrick would purposefully overwork Duvall in order for her to reach his desired level of hysteria and fear. Years later, Duvall has been interviewed about the film and has spoken of the experience in hindsight: "After a while, your body rebels. It says: 'Stop doing this to me. I don't want to cry every day.' [...] And yet I did it. I don't know how I did it. Jack [Nicholson] said that to me, too. He said, 'I don't know how you do it.'"¹⁷⁸ These anecdotes about Duvall's experience troubled me, and upon watching *The Shining* I found her performance to be both viscerally upsetting and entirely believable. Yet I was equally troubled by how, in an effort to reclaim the performance and argue for its artistic value, one could come to see the filmmaker's treatment of her on set as a necessary evil. I could see this case, in which an actor was put through a certain amount of suffering to achieve a performance, as one among many, though the suffering was often more self-inflicted and subsequently folded into a film's marketing push. I have previously cited Leonardo DiCaprio's award-winning performance in *The Revenant*, and I could continue naming actors who make headlines for what is generally described as "Method Acting": Jamie Foxx in *Ray* (2004), Anne Hathaway in *Les Misérables* (2012), Jared Leto in *Suicide Squad* (2016), and the list goes on.¹⁷⁹ In response to the positioning of such instances of actorly excess as an admirable show of talent and endurance, there has been an opposite push criticizing such methods of acting, arguing that they are displays of ego that can get in the way of other actors in a production and potentially encourage others to do the same for a chance at stardom.¹⁸⁰

I would hesitate to conclude that there has been a significant shift in acting methodologies; there are still proponents of Strasberg's Method, as there have been numerous actors who are associated with the Method despite not being affiliated with the Actors Studio or applying its techniques, going back as far as Marlon Brando's early breakout roles. Rather than identifying a shift in acting methodologies, this thesis has instead focused on the media narratives that have shaped the cultural understanding of the acting techniques used by Hollywood stars, smoothing their complexities out to create intriguing narratives. I have found that this push and pull in the cultural discourse surrounding intense performance has been just as important to understanding the link between suffering and art as the performances themselves, if not more so.

One notable way in which the discourse around this phenomenon has developed in the last few years is in how it has come to include actors who perform their own stunts, as opposed to letting stunt professionals perform in their place and having the footage seamlessly cut together in the final edit. Just as the use of close-ups is praised for allowing audiences a closer, more intimate look at the emotional work of performing, long and unbroken takes are celebrated as a marker of authenticity in action scenes. Long takes allow audiences to see that not only was a stunt performed in its entirety, but it was visibly performed by the star; there is no illusionistic editing to hide behind. This can be linked to a number of shifts in the film industry in the last two decades, including change in dominant modes of circulation of films, and more specifically the rise of streaming platforms. In an effort to keep audiences interested in seeing films in theaters, studios

¹⁷⁸ Maria Pasquini, "Shelley Duvall Opens Up About 'Difficult' Experience Filming *The Shining*," *People*, February 12, 2021, <https://people.com/movies/shelley-duvall-recalls-difficult-experience-filming-the-shining/>

¹⁷⁹ Drew Grant, "Method Acting Moments That Went Too Far," *Collider*, January 1, 2019, <https://collider.com/method-acting-movies-extreme/>

¹⁸⁰ Bastián, "Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting."

have relied on making films into events that cannot be easily replicated by watching them via streaming platforms in one's own home.¹⁸¹ A formula that has proven to be successful is the promise of seeing stars performing their own stunts in action blockbusters, shifting the discourse around intensity to how it manifests in the training for and execution of those stunts. For example, following in the footsteps of famed stunt performers such as Buster Keaton and Jackie Chan, actors like Keanu Reeves and Charlize Theron have been praised for their commitment to stunts and stunt choreography as is showcased in films like *John Wick* (2014) and *Atomic Blonde* (2017). The latter film has been noted for a seven minute-long shot of a fight scene in which, as the director David Leitch has said, "we could experience how exhausting and physically grueling it is to be in a fight like this."¹⁸² Yet the star who has become the most synonymous with action stunts in the last few years is undoubtedly Tom Cruise, whose most successful films in the last decade have been action films with set pieces constructed around increasingly extreme stunts. Film critic Bilge Eberi writes of this in the context of the actor's career comeback: "Cruise has clawed his way back to respectability. And he has done so in an oddly poetic way: by suffering onscreen. He's become known for those films' spectacular stunts, many of which he conceives of and performs himself. Once Hollywood's "It" boy—bright, gleaming, untouchable—Cruise fought back into our good graces by bleeding for us."¹⁸³ The cultural discourse around stunt performance and stardom, as well as its long and complex history in a cinematic context, is ripe for study, particularly with case studies similarly to how this thesis was structured.

Narrative films are beholden to the performances at their center, and performances live or die according to how they are received by audiences. As I have shown, audiences seek a form of truth in performance, regardless of whether it is achieved through innate skill or intricate preparation, whether an actor can disconnect from a performance as soon as the camera stops rolling or needs to remain in character to continue embodying them. In any case, stardom ensures that performances do not happen in a vacuum, and the sensationalization of an actor's working process continues to be a point of fascination.

¹⁸¹ Frank Pallota, "The greatest stunt yet from 'Fast & Furious': Saving movie theaters," *CNN*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/14/media/fast-and-furious-9-trailer/index.html>

¹⁸² Chris O'Falt, "'Atomic Blonde' Stunt Choreography: Charlize Theron's Long Take," *IndieWire*, July 28, 2017, <https://www.indiewire.com/2017/07/atomic-blonde-stunt-choreography-charlize-theron-long-take-action-scene-1201860595/>

¹⁸³ Bilge Eberi, "Tom Cruise's Last Stand," *Vulture*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.vulture.com/article/tom-cruise-top-gun-maverick.html>

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