"The art of acting is not to act; once you show them more, what you show them, in fact, is bad acting."
—SIR ANTHONY HOPKINS

The Death of Acting

EVERYBODY KNOWS by now that the digital revolution is upon us, that you can make a real movie with a couple of crewmembers and a home-video camera *(Once, The Blair Witch Project, Pieces of April)*. But there's an equally exciting, though little-mentioned, effect of that technology. I'm going to break the rules of good dramatic writing and give away my point right now: Screen acting as we know it is terminally ill and ready to die. A new form of performance is about to take its place, and you don't need to sign up for lessons. It'll happen without your knowing it—as inevitably and suddenly and relentlessly as it happened in the mid-1920s with the introduction of sound. It happened once again in the fifties, when Marlon Brando, James Dean, Paul Newman, Kim Stanley, Geraldine Page, and many others popularized the Method.

And, like all deaths, it will presage a rebirth.

I am, I will confess, a born-again digital user. I have renounced the satanic tyranny of film and embraced the new director's god of the twenty-first century: "digital capture." It happened quickly and recently: In 2004, I directed *Flyboys*, a story of the first combat pilots; young American boys who volunteered to fly for France in World War I. We shot it in fifty days. Well, we shot the actors in fifty days; the airplanes took a little bit longer. The special effects took longer still—but those are other stories. Let's stick with the actors.

Like all screen actors who have appeared in front of the camera since film and sprockets and cameras were combined with lights and directors and other actors—and any number of animals, vehicles, and props—our actors learned their lines, rehearsed their actions, and then launched into their performances as the director, yours truly, called "action" and the camera rolled. Except for one big difference: *There was no film in the camera.*

The camera we used, the Panavision Genesis, was the first 35 mm digital camera—one generation beyond high-definition video. It uses the Panavision lenses currently in the front of hundreds of 35 mm film cameras around the world, the standard system of recording the "reality" of the actors who perform before it. Aptly named, it was the first of its breed: It records on a tiny digital cassette for forty minutes between instant "reloads," it records in light levels that are considerably below those necessary for film, it makes no sound. And it represents the end of an era, a revolution. It is to cameras as sprockets were to film. A few years later, there are now several other cameras of similar quality and lesser cost available. There is, save for ignorance and inertia, no turning back.

No film in the camera. Digital shooting completely eliminates the need to watch dailies, to "check the gate" for dirt, scratches, or imperfections, to wonder if a stunt really worked or a magical moment was captured. Was that something in the background we didn't see? Was that extra looking in the lens? No problem. There is nothing to send to the lab or to watch the next day—or even later. *No film* purchased, exposed, developed, wasted, or printed. There is no production time lost—easily worth a half hour a day—to reload and check the camera (in all our many days I never noticed a "reload"). There are no short ends to deal with; no questions about what was seen on camera during a take. What you saw—on a high-resolution, big-screen monitor—is what you got. And *no dailies:* Another hour, at least, saved in the director's waking, working day.

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The final image, whether projected digitally (a burgeoning technology in theaters: Currently there are several thousand so equipped in the U.S., and inevitably all will be digital) or on 35 mm film, as it is currently projected, is indistinguishable from an original 35 mm image—in fact, arguably it is superior. But there are several other superior aspects. Among them: It never wears out (digitally projected, there are no scratches, breaks, or damages) and there is no extra expense transferring it to the now-ubiquitous "digital intermediate"—a savings of several hundreds of thousands of dollars.

I should also add that despite the fact that we were driving the Model T of the new technology on *Flyboys,* we had not a moment of downtime due to technical problems. In fact, almost perversely, we had no Panavision or video technician on the set. Our cameraman, Henry Braham, had no experience with this camera, yet we lost not a minute to relighting, reshooting, or second-guessing. Bright daylight exteriors, aerial dogfight sequences, day-for-night scenes, nighttime scenes—all were shot convincingly and quickly, and were qualitatively superior to film.

Also superior to film is the latitude of exposure and the adaptability to digital effects. Operating temperatures are considerably expanded, and there is no

sound of running film to dampen or eliminate in the case of very close shots. There was, in short, no aspect aesthetically or financially inferior to shooting on film. Rather, there was an enormous saving in time and money and convenience, with no trade-off in quality. But that's the least of it. What's most exciting about it, to me, is what this new technology really represents and where it inevitably will lead the artists in front of the camera.

For a hundred years actors have performed in front of cameras, struggling to create, or re-create, reality. And for a hundred years they have carried a secret burden: the burden of using up money by the second. When the camera is rolling, film—an expensive, fragile, rather unpredictable strip of chemicals—has been racing through the shutter at ninety feet a minute and, after all is shot and done, about $5,500 an hour per camera. An hour of digital tape, by contrast, costs about $135.

Beyond that, during rehearsals—the actor's one chance to experiment, fail, improvise, stumble, or fall—the camera *isn't* rolling; it would normally be a very expensive waste of film. But then the set is silenced, dozens of crew scurry into invisibility, the camera crew is alerted, and the call of "Rolling!" signals the start of filming, with a ritualistic intensity that culminates in the cry of "Action!" And, for the poor actor, the pressure is on: the pressure to not waste film, to not use up precious resources, the pressure—an actor's worst enemy—*to be good.* To not screw it up. To be fresh. To be surprising. To be real. To get it right. Often in one take. Above all, *not to act.*

But it's never like the rehearsal, when the camera isn't rolling, when precious film isn't being "wasted." Somewhere on the set is a producer or production manager—and somewhere in every actor's consciousness there is a monitor—counting the footage, adding up the vast expense of the exposed, developed, and printed footage. Every actor knows what it's like to give their best performance in the rehearsal only to spend, often in vain, the rest of the allotted time trying to recapture that magic. And every director knows the frustration of trying to coax an actor into doing what they did in rehearsal, when they were relaxed and un-self-conscious. But now, with digital, there is *no more rehearsal.* No difference between rehearsal and performance, because rehearsal *is* performance. And in time it will be obvious that performance is no different than rehearsal. You can forget your lines, trip over the furniture, improvise, and miss your marks. If the camera was on the set, the performance will be on the screen. This, by the way, is good for at least another free half hour in the shooting day.

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For years one of the highest praises visited upon an actor's performance has been that they were acting "as if the camera weren't there." In fact, this is often the public's most indelible impression of acting skill. But it's a completely false one. For any middling actor, there's virtually nothing intimidating about a camera being on the set; after all, "real life" occurs in front of all sorts of appurtenances: cars, lamps, pedestrians, neighbors, etc. The camera is just another movable piece of equipment on the set. *Until it starts rolling.* That's when it gets intimidating. That's when people make all those mistakes and waste all that film.

Point an unloaded camera at someone, then tell them it's rolling. It's the difference between pointing a toy gun at someone and then aiming one with bullets in it.

The film camera isn't the actor's enemy. It's just an antiquated nineteenth-century box of shutters and gears. The *film* that's coursing through it is the enemy. The whole trick of directing and acting in fictional films—and the biggest challenge of making documentaries—is to make the subjects *unaware that the camera's rolling*. That's why rehearsals are so easy for actors, why their off-camera performances are usually so much more natural and relaxed than when they're on-camera. All over Los Angeles and New York, actors are in "film-acting" or "audition" classes, studying, all to one end: how to ignore the camera. Now the camera will ignore *them*.

Meanwhile, every actor secretly dreads the surprise announcement of "Reload!" as the crews' eyes roll up and the director's roll down and their fellow actors' eyes turn somewhere away. Then they have to get themselves back together to start again or—worse for many actors—pick up where they left off. In particularly emotional scenes, actors often never quite get back to their pre-reload intensity. (Of course, it can be argued that the pressure imposed by the running camera leads to an intensity and concentration that mere rehearsal cannot accomplish, but not many actors would agree with that claim. I'd submit that there's certainly enough pressure to perform without that added by the celluloid whizzing through the camera.)

Along with that breakthrough comes the dissolution of most of an actor's fears: flubbing a line, sneezing—any number of perceived accidents—and having the director cut and start again. (But not, often, before a discussion as to whether there's enough film left in the camera to make it worthwhile, or should we throw away what's left and take a few minutes to reload? And why don't you just go sit down while we reset and reload and take it easy and try to get back into your performance after that?) All these dreaded moments—and the days and nights filled with them—are now over.

I envision subtle but noticeable changes in the job of the director and camera operator as well. As mentioned, rehearsal is now an obsolete concept. So, apart from blocking the scene, why rehearse?

All these dreaded moments...are now over.

Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* ushered in an interesting approach to shooting a scene: Two camera operators simply stepped into the scene and started shooting away. If they saw each other, they cut it out in editing, but for the most part they simultaneously and continuously shot the whole scene, from beginning to end, not stopping to reset the actors, to reload the cameras, or to accommodate new angles: no regard for screen direction. In short, a revolution in filmmaking technique—and a revolution for the actors, who were free to move anywhere on the set or within the rooms where the scenes took place: total liberation from hitting marks, being conscious of lighting, or repeating rehearsed action.

There's another area due for a complete rethink: the whole concept of long-shot, two-shot single, etc. With digital, a two-shot can yield one or two singles *in the editing room*. Why waste time on the set when you can shoot a one-size-fits-all on the set . . . especially under extreme time constraints? A close-up can be noisy; actors are often conscious of the film running through the sprockets. It can be intimidating. Film can be blown up about 15 percent before it starts to lose quality and become grainy; the Genesis image can be blown up 200 percent or more. You can pan, dolly, zoom in or out in the editing room, too. This ability is bound to change how a director chooses to budget the shooting day, and, once again, will impact the actors. The actors used to know what the shot was—close, medium, long—and would often adjust their performances accordingly. This could be good . . . but also make for a very bad habit. Now they can be kept unaware of that aspect; again a slight, but meaningful, elimination of a century-old distraction.

So here's the twentieth-century actress: She knew when the camera was rolling, she knew how close the shot was, she struggled to be as natural and relaxed as she was in rehearsal, and she knew that film is money, so she wanted, *needed*, to get it right in as few takes as possible. And she needed to maintain her concentration while the crew had to stop and reload the camera. The camera rolled, the director called "Action!" and she was on: It was showtime. As Katharine Hepburn once observed, "I think you either can do it or you can't do it . . . I don't think it requires any special brilliance."

Now here's the twenty-first-century actress: She walks on the set, she's relaxed because she knows that there's no film in the camera, and maybe the camera's so small that she barely notices it's in the room. Then she "rehearses," knowing that anything that happens, any inspiration, any surprises, will be "on film." Maybe there's no rehearsal at all; maybe the director doesn't even say "Action!" Maybe there are no other crewmembers on the set; maybe she's even in a public place—a restaurant, say—because none of the "real people" around notice the camera. If she forgets a line, she doesn't apologize to the director or the other actors, she just goes on with the scene—the way we all do in real life. In fact, real life is all that interests her and the director, because there's virtually no difference between reality and performance: A visitor to the set would not know whether she's acting or not.

And neither will the audience.