

What about TV Acting?

“Cinematic Charisma and TV Performance”

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In this brief paper, I want to consider not only the question posed by the organizers—“Why is their so little scholarship devoted to [actors’] craftsmanship, labor, and central role in production?”—but also the possibility that the conditions that contributed to this scholarly status quo might be changing, as the result of film actors’ continuing migration to the small screen. In short, how might the increased presence of Hollywood performers in contemporary television series be shaping popular and critical discourse around TV acting?

Historically, as the organizers note, scholars have tended to engage minimally with the issue of television performance—a reflection, Jeremy G. Butler argues, of various “practical and theoretical” factors, including TV’s traditionally low prestige value among performance media, the lack of a sufficiently nuanced analytical vocabulary, and the “ambiguities of the actor-character relationship” (146, 145). Along similar lines, Roberta Pearson describes the “multiple determinants” shaping TV acting, which can make it difficult to readily delineate the contributions of the performer from, say, those of the writer, showrunner, or editor (a challenge Stephen Lacey also notes in a recent issue of *Cinema Journal*.) The result is that while there exists a robust tradition of *evaluating* television performers—as practiced by both fans and TV critics—attempts to *describe* their labor remain relatively sparse.

Even allowing for such difficulties, however, the question remains why there has not been a greater critical interest in the topic of TV performance. In other words, it may not only be that scholars have lacked the language or training to properly analyze small-screen acting. It may also be that cultural expectations about TV acting have strongly mitigated against its analysis: that for many American viewers, a good performance on TV has been, almost by default, an “invisible” one, in which the actor is sufficiently subordinated to character, such that the mimetic illusion can be adequately maintained.

Thus, while contemporary audiences consistently evince their willingness and capacity to conceive of film acting as a “craft,” they appear reluctant to bestow on television acting a similar status. Indeed, so thoroughly has the working knowledge of cinematic acting techniques like the “Method” penetrated popular consciousness, it has become difficult for many audience members to conceive of film performance as anything *other* than labor—and, perhaps, labor of a particular and gendered kind. Here, I am thinking of recent articles about the allegedly method-driven antics by Jared Leto (in *Suicide Squad*) and Leonardo DiCaprio (in *The Revenant*), which argue that film acting has been conflated with muscular and frequently masochistic feats of “endurance” (Sims), and that such efforts have become a fetish or “marketing tool” more than an “actual technique” (Bastién).

At the risk of overgeneralizing, then, it seems possible viewers have traditionally watched movies to see that labor—to witness “acting”—but watched TV to *not* see it: to encounter not actors, but rather characters, with whom many will form bonds of singular strength and intensity.

The question is whether such perceptions are poised to change, as the result of the wave of film actors, including A-list “stars,” appearing in much-watched and widely acclaimed series such as *True Detective*, *The Leftovers*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Hannibal*, and *Stranger Things*, among others. This wave of arrivals is part of what Jason Mittell has noted is a more widespread influx of film professionals into the television industry. Because cinema actors bring with them, to varying degrees, what Butler terms the “intertextuality of the film star,” or what Richard Dyer calls “charisma,” such performers make it more difficult to ignore the creative labor involved (148). In other words, they force into view what audiences might have historically preferred remain hidden: the actor, no longer completely concealed behind character.

For me, one particularly illustrative case study has been Vera Farmiga’s work in *Bates Motel*. I like to think, for instance, that my appreciation of Farmiga’s performance as Norma Bates stems from what strike me as unexpected, idiosyncratic, and frequently delightful choices—such as her decision to have her character greet instances of even mortal peril with a sort of generalized annoyance. But I also wonder how much of this impression derives from Farmiga’s acting in the series, and how much from the favorable opinion I formed after seeing her in films like *Up in the Air* or *The Departed*. Or from the 2006 profile I read in *The New York Times*, the tag line for which proclaimed that she “has the talent and commitment to craft that call to mind a young Meryl Streep.” Indeed, what does it suggest that after reading the roundtable question, the first association I had with “TV acting” was a performer primarily known for working in film?

Whether this infusion of cinematic “charisma” into contemporary television will result in increased attention to the performer’s corporeal and vocal labor is of course well beyond the scope of this paper. But along with other significant factors—like the medium’s rapid rise in cultural prestige—it does seem to augur the increased visibility of at least a certain subset of television actors, and perhaps TV acting more generally.

Works Cited

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