

THE EDGE OF THE STAGE

by
Catherine Purdie
B.A., University of Massachusetts
Boston, Massachusetts
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Signature of author

Catherine Purdie, Department of Architecture
May 11, 1984

Certified by

Richard Leacock, Professor of Cinema
Thesis Supervisor

Accepted by

Nicholas Negroponte, Chairman, Departmental
Committee for Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

The edge of the stage is not only the point where the mask is removed but also the line where performance enters daily life. The film, The Edge of the Stage, revolves around this point through the lives of five performers. Many levels of illusion are presented and removed as they portray different characters in the film, including themselves. Their roles are both unique and universal as they become metaphors for performance. The vehicle, the film, is not only a transparent medium in which to express the art of performance but rather a structure to reference the performers' art and their lives to the nature of performance in all our lives.

This paper examines the role of illusion in both film and performance and the structures that control and break that illusion. Moving through the history of these intertwined art forms, the paper traces some of the ideas and observations that provided a framework for The Edge of the Stage.

The thesis consists of a text and a videotape. The tape is 18 minutes long, in color, with sound, and is a transfer onto 3/4" video from film.

Thesis Supervisor: Richard Leacock
Title: Professor of Cinema

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Chapter One
Structure and Illusion

The structure of any film is intimately tied to its philosophy and content. This framework, on which the film illusion is built, describes the point where the suspension of disbelief takes hold. Whether the illusion is that of reality--the world we see--or of a state of mind--the world of the imagination--this illusion is true within the world of the film. It is the way in which the audience's faith in this world is manipulated that constitutes the power of the film.

Through the shot sequence and through the manipulation of image and sound--separately and in relationship to each other--arise possibilities for editing which remain unexploited to this day. A new way of thinking and feeling . . . Thanks to the rhythm of editing and the change of perspective, it is becoming possible to describe characters, situations and themes in a completely different way than that of the traditional arts. From now on the spectator can be made to think by other combinations, and the author's point of view can be expressed through this technique or not at all.

Hans-Jürgen Syberberg¹

Appropriately, the earliest experiments with the structure of film were done by the conjurer Méliès. He found that film allowed him to create magic tricks that were not possible live. Although magicians had already perfected

techniques of white on white, black on black, and a system of mirrors to make things appear and disappear on stage, editing gave this effect new possibilities. By turning the camera on and off, Méliès could change one thing into another simply by replacing them on the set. He also developed masks and multiple exposures that allowed him to control all the elements in the frame. A head leaves its body, then confronts its double; the double disappears and reappears in another part of the frame; other parts of the body leave and reassemble in another form after performing some tricks. For Méliès, the narrative structure of the film was a device that held together his tricks or visual puns, like beads on a string. The audience responded to the magical illusions from within the world as Méliès presented it. A marvelous laboratory, outer space or undersea, where the elements are controlled by a scientist/conjurer, were appropriate settings for magical occurrences. Although Méliès used the possibilities of editing, his camera remained stationary. Tracking shots were used to change the scale of images, but the frame remained that of the proscenium. His revolutionary work was in the details composed within that frame.

The effect on the audience of working within a familiar or understandable framework and then breaking away from that framework is an important element in a film, whether the intent is to draw the audience into suspension of disbelief or to keep them at a distance. For Méliès it was only necessary

to draw the audience in far enough to deliver the trick.

The early films of Hollywood strove to create a complete illusion where the audience could become involved and manipulated into empathy. The historical film, the detective story, the western, the science fiction film, and the musical each had a framework within which each shot proceeded logically. The development of the musical describes the increasing sophistication of the cinema illusion. The first musicals began with the introduction of sound. They presented musical numbers in revue on a stage within the film. Even as the camera began to be exploited to create more dynamic performances, as in the bird's eye views of Busby Berkeley extravaganzas, the setting for a performance was a theater. However, the later musicals starring Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly expanded the possibilities of performance on film by using the world at large as a set. As the audience accepts the idea of Gene Kelly dancing and singing in the streets or Fred Astaire doing an impromptu routine with a shoeshine man, we begin to relate to our own world as a likely place for performance to occur.

Godard has exploited this phenomenon in several of his films. The protagonists in The Band of Outsiders break into a dance routine in a bar in the same way they mime a murder. A murder later occurs in reality, or at least just like in the movies. The very illusions that the movies drew us into are now just as real as anything else, but no more help.

As the cinematic illusion has become more sophisticated and more pervasive, there has been a concurrent movement to acknowledge that illusion within the film itself. The camera has become more fluid and can enter into the real world of non-actors, exposing the everyday drama to the audience. This closes the circle of where a performance can occur: it literally can happen within our lives if we know how to look. The cinema verite films of Ricky Leacock show regular people doing their regular activities, seemingly too busy to be aware of the camera. Sometimes we see famous people doing regular things, thereby becoming as vulnerable as us, and sometimes we see regular people doing unusual things, which allows us to imagine ourselves these things. Leacock's Community of Praise is a portrait of a family whose life revolves around their Christian faith. As we become intimate with the members of the family, their very vulnerability makes their religion understandable, for them, without it being something we feel compelled to take on. There is an illusion of being there as an observer, or even a participant in the action, but we do not become manipulated emotionally; our empathy is of the type with which we approach our neighbor. The audience can see a drama in all parts of our lives, but only if we look.

It is comparatively easy to set up a basic model for epic theatre. For practical experiments I usually picked as my example of completely simple, natural epic theatre an incident such as can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating

to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place. The bystanders may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may 'see things a different way'; the point is that the demonstrator acts the behavior of the driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident.

Bertolt Brecht²

Brecht has based this description of his epic theater on an event that could perhaps be a part of a cinema verite film. Although the world of a film or of a play will always be one step removed from the world we move through, Brecht's work was to acknowledge this distance and thus to create a new relationship between a performance and the audience. Brecht called for a revolutionary relationship between a performance and the audience. By exposing the nature of the illusion created in a play, the audience would see the position of the characters in the play as unique and separate from themselves, thus inviting them to make their own judgments rather than being drawn into empathy.

Brecht's philosophy and work have had a great influence on theater and performing arts today. Mobius Theater in Boston carried the audience with them as they staged a performance of Orpheus that moved in time through the space of the city. Even more traditional plays make use of the entire theater space, performing in the round or creating elements that happen around the audience, so there is no physical line

between the performers and the audience. When sets are used, they are usually quite obviously constructed to create an effect, and the action of the play can point to this. A recent performance at the Boston Shakespeare Company of a collection of Chekhov plays employed a flat with a door as a set and a device. The way in which the actors moved through the door or stepped from behind the flat mirrored the relationship of acted scenarios to asides in the work itself.

The structural elements that make and break illusions can function as puns on the content of the work or on the medium itself. The tradition of the aside, where the actor steps away from the drama and speaks directly to the audience, has become a formal element used on many levels. The play by Peter Handke entitled Offending the Audience is all aside; the actors never take on characters except those of actors delivering a diatribe directly to the audience. All the expectations of the play-going audience are undermined.

Luis Buñuel uses the expectations of the audience to comment on social conventions. The Phantom of Liberty is composed of puns on conventions in film and the normal reactions to these conventions. We are shown parents being outraged by some pictures their daughter has brought home. Having not seen the photographs, we know what they are by the outrage of the parents. Then we see the pictures, which are of famous buildings and cities, and we laugh at how silly we were to have been led to imagine things by the film. We also

see how silly it is to be outraged by pictures and how easily we can be fooled.

The structures of films and performances can incorporate the pun and the aside into the world presented. Each element--the characters, the setting, and the narrative--can be taken both at face value and as an internal commentary on these elements. The audience follows, not only by suspension of disbelief, but rather through a map or key within which everything has its own logic. Dusan Makavejev's WR: Mysteries of the Organism weaves together a theatrical narrative, a love story and murder, with documentary interviews, found footage, a performance on the streets of New York, and various compilations of sound and image. Within each different thread, the audience gets involved, is amused or sad, but it is in the change from one to the other that the audience really understands what Makavejev is saying. The resonance of one scene on another changes the perception of both. That the audience is held at a distance through these changes allows us to see the way in which one thing affects another and to make our own connections. The way in which the documentary interviews with people who knew or were connected with Wilhelm Reich combine and interact creates one thread which weaves through the love story of a Yugoslavian woman and a Russian man. Intercut with these threads are interviews and performances about sexuality and politics that refer back and forth with the action of the story and the thoughts expressed, creating

connections between the U.S. and Russia, Russia and Yugoslavia, and sexual and political freedom. In effect, all of life was there, in the same way we make connections and judgments in daily life, by experiencing and finding out about a number of things during a space of time and relating them.

WR is an example of the possibilities that are inherent in filmmaking but that are rarely exploited. Each element of a film can be selected for its effect on the whole, rather than according to the formula of a particular style. Staged scenes can be used for their very artificiality, in contrast to more naturalistic documentary scenes. Synch sound footage can be incorporated into an editing structure akin to music or poetry. Sound can be used to change the effect of the image. Illusions can be created and undermined to tell a story, create a mood, describe an idea, or none of the above.

In making The Edge of the Stage, I am exploiting the freedom of expression that is possible in film editing to reflect the ideas, stories, and illusions I have found in the world of performance.

Chapter Two

The Edge of the Stage

The Edge of the Stage is a film about the nature of performance in our lives. It revolves around the lives of five different types of performers, each of whose work expresses particular qualities within their personal lives. I have filmed each of the performers in a variety of situations: in performance, at home and with their friends, or in direct conversation with the camera. The way in which the different parts of their lives are woven through the film shows not only their lives and work but touches on ideas about all performers.

Do not seal off the stage.
Leaning back, let the spectator be aware
Of the busy preparations going on
Cunningly intended for him. He sees
A tin moon floating down, a shingle roof
Brought in. Don't show him too much.
But do show him! And friends, let him be aware that
You are not conjurors, but workers.

Bertolt Brecht³

I was initially drawn to each of the performers in the film for the personal direction of their work and for a certain quality of vulnerability and humanness in their performances. Performers are self-conscious people, necessarily, as they are conscious of their effect as performers. However, there is now an edge to that self-consciousness and the underlying vulnerability, not to become seamlessly a

recreation of someone else. The effect on the audience is that of seeing not only the performance but the person performing. The way in which The Edge of the Stage connects the different aspects of a performer's life exploits that effect. Malechi Simmons, who is 11 years old, performs as a magician, but his performance is not that far removed from his enactment of a karate fight, a chase scene, and a murder while playing with his friends. Ed Stivender makes his living as a storyteller, but the telling of stories is his life; he describes himself and his ideas through stories.

The way in which performers reflect their communities is a continuing thread in the film. The Floor Bandits, a group of break dancers, are shown in competition with rival dancers and in performance at a dance party for the Hispanic community in Chelsea. Sophie Parker is by profession a clown and actress, but she is also involved in the lesbian community in Boston. She does a juggling performance with a female backup band at the bar Somewhere Else.

Nothing occurs in isolation; each performance grows from the person and from the community and particularly from traditions of performers. Every performance in some way mingles tradition and modernity. The Floor Bandits are break dancing within an evening of dance that is traditional to Hispanic cultures. Ed Stivender tells traditional stories, but he modifies them, adding modern elements for their humor and to comment on tradition. Sophie Parker's clown is in the

tradition of clowns, with a red nose and white face, but part of the tradition of the clown is to show the humor in traditional roles. Sophie begins an exotic scarf dance but winds up juggling the scarves. She becomes a ballerina in a pink tutu but discovers that she is less awkward on a unicycle than on the toes of her clown shoes. Ellen Rothenberg's work as a performance artist is in an entirely new form, but it concerns itself with the traditional roles of women performing. She plays an actress, a woman making up her face and her nails, and a belly dancer. Each of her roles shows only the outside, the details of the role: pocketbooks, makeup, costumes, and their appropriate gestures. It is the way in which they are placed together that makes each one speak.

The Edge of the Stage moves between performances on the street, in a school, and in a bar and back and forth between formal performances and impromptu roles. There is a certain ambiguity in the change from one "performance" to another as to what part the performer is playing. Is it a role for an audience, or one for the film, or none at all? Ellen Rothenberg begins preparing for her performance; then, during the performance, the film moves to a scene of her at home cooking, but it turns out that she is cooking in her belly dancing costume. Malechi Simmons is playing with his friends and mimes falling down dead, and the scene changes to his magic show.

The rhythm of editing in the film creates comparisons and

associations between the various roles and events. The performers act as commentators on one another and on themselves. The break dance competition is decided by applause, and then Ed Stivender talks about the feeling of applause after a successful performance. Each commenting on their roles, Sophie Parker's mock scarf dance is followed by Ed's story, which begins "Being a princess is such a bore . . ." After juggling to the song "Total Control," Sophie is talking with her friends about feeling invisible in the bar. This becomes another performance, as her friends describe and mimic her invisibility: ". . . you really caught my attention." The role of the narrator is played by a puppet who introduces the characters and comments on the action. As it turns out, he is also a character who "hangs out on Washington Street" and is a performer himself.

The film is composed of short sequences, primarily of scenes observed, whether a performance or an event or ordinary activities. The movement from one event to another flows through the motion of the shots, such as a magician's ball changing to a juggling ball, or by the sense and rhythm of sound. The audience can make connections between the different performers and their various roles, or they can just watch the performances as they happen in all parts of life.

Footnotes

1. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, In Search of Lost Paradise, Zoetrope Films.
2. Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 121.
3. Bertolt Brecht, quoted in Frederic Ewen, Bertolt Brecht, His Life, His Art, and His Times (New York: The Citadel Press, 1967), p. 226.

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