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Ethnography published online 11 August 2011

DOI: 10.1177/1466138111413336

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An anthropologist among the actors

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Ethnography

0(00) 1–18

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Abstract

In the ethnographic literature of performance, anthropologist musicians and dancers are far more commonly encountered than actors. While few anthropologists can be considered successful performers in the art forms they study, the scarcity of accounts of participant observation in the mounting of drama suggests that other factors may be at work to dissuade anthropologists from acting pursuits. In spite of some recent work that uses acting as one among several ethnographic strategies, anthropological reserve towards the participatory study of theatrical and film performance persists. This article argues that there are ample reasons for why acting as a form of participant observation should be taken more seriously and engaged in more often by anthropologists. Committed anthropological participation in theatrical, televisual and film performances may be very useful for exploring characterization in narrative, intersubjective understandings of 'reality', and the culture of media production.

Keywords

acting, theatre, performance, media, ethnography, Bollywood, Hollywood, participant observation

It is part of the fieldwork condition to be unknown, and sometimes invisible; but it is also part of the game gradually to establish a position to speak from – that is, an identity. (Kirsten Hastrup, 1992: 333)

In the anthropological literature of performance, it is not uncommon to come across the dancing or musical anthropologist. Rarely do we meet the anthropologist as actor. True, the boundaries between acting and dance and between dance

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and music are often subtle to non-existent in many cultural settings. But with the recent extraordinary growth and reach of global mass media forms in which acting flourishes, there has not been a commensurate increase in ethnographic explorations of them. In spite of theoretical interest in innovative ethnographic techniques and modes of embodiment, relatively few anthropologists have made *acting*, or playing a character amidst a set of characters in a dramatic scenario, a keypoint of their ethnographic experience. In the pages that follow, I discuss the reasons for this, review some recent work that begins to broach potential uses of acting, and finally argue that acting in an ethnographic frame may be particularly useful for understanding media production, as well as how plausibility in performance is collaboratively achieved.

I start by clarifying what I mean by acting, and how I distinguish it from other kinds of performance in anthropological endeavours. Bearing in mind the many field narratives and confessionals in which anthropologists cast themselves as self-conscious actors in complex cultural plays, perhaps one could say that all anthropologists are actors of a sort. At the most fundamental level, there is the subtle acquisition of the gestures, stances and movements of the people the ethnographer spends time with (Okely, 2007). But the engagement with dramatic metaphor is most vividly represented in accounts of the subjective experiences of participation that ethnography entails, where the ethnographer struggles to grasp their 'role' in community life, with missteps sometimes veering into farce (Barley, 1984). Female ethnographers, their sensitivities sharpened by feminist anthropology, have contributed enormously to the critical analysis of self-presentation in the fieldwork encounter, describing and interpreting in some detail the performative and sartorial accommodations necessary to women's participant observer status (Gold, 1988; Okely, 1983; Wolf, 1996). The injunctions of reflexive anthropology extended the necessity of these meditations to ethnographers both male and female, compelling anthropologists to act increasingly as their 'own key informant' (Davies, 1999: 183) and to take a place on the stage, as it were, of the subject community (Unnithan-Kumar, 2006). The results of such conscious placement in the fieldwork context can run the gamut from mundane give and take to florid improvisation. In some parts of the world, memorably Melanesia, the recasting of anthropologist into a culturally meaningful character – an ancestor – can be especially disorienting (Kirsch, 2006; Lepowsky, 1993).

Culture itself can be conceived of as a kind of performance, and anthropologists have drawn effectively, and often, on the language of drama to explain linguistic behaviour and self-representation (Bauman, 1974; Schechner, 1985). As intriguing as it is to speculate whether the performative framing of all experience is a human universal, my interest here is in those performances that are aesthetically, linguistically, or kinaesthetically set apart from the flow of normal activity, the special object of study by anthropologists, and also ethnomusicologists (Barz and Cooley, 1997; Blacking, 1973; Feld, 1990). Included in these kinds of performances are those that bubble up in everyday interaction, like songs and poems that a good number of a society's members are expected to master (Abu-Lughod, 1986;

Kisliuk, 1997). There are also those performances that are more overtly staged, placed in their own spaces, practised by their own specialists, performances that draw closer to a Western notion of 'performing art'. It is these phenomena that I have in mind, including dance and music, live theatre, and film or television drama. Seeking to both observe and participate, the ethnographer is challenged to find a position within these practices that allows both. Many ethnomusicologists and some dance ethnographers have responded by attempting to join in the art form that they wish to study; scholars of drama and media largely have not.

My own thinking on this topic was shaped by an unexpected invitation to take a non-speaking, walk-on part in a television serial in India. This came in the course of a long-term project examining the culture of filmmaking in Mumbai (Bombay, as it is still popularly known in film circles), and the production and use of costume in particular. I had enjoyed opportunities, both before and after this event, to 'lurk' on film and television sets, watching the action, talking to film personnel, or staying out of the way as the situation demanded. I had been an audience member for a taping of the 'reality show' *Indian Idol*. I interviewed stunt men, make-up artists, steadycam operators, costumers and assistant directors as and when their duties allowed them time to talk to me about their training, skills and experience. Most of the time, I was content to observe the situational dynamics of the set. I did not at all anticipate or even wish to insert myself directly into the action.

I should say that being swept into a walk-on role is not an unusual phenomenon in and of itself in the Indian film or television world; a day or two spent as a Bollywood extra is now not only a tourist experience to be savoured (Dare, 2005; Singh, 2007) but the germ of what is fast becoming almost a sub-genre of travel-writing. One article in the online magazine *Salon* described the progress of a young woman from 'casting agent, a dancer, a pitch-making screenwriter, a documentary assistant and an aspiring film journalist', to being an extra, a dancer, and finally, a stunt woman (Anna, 2008). Having had my own, brief immersion into this world, these accounts, bordering on the ethnographic yet free of ethnography's disciplinary concerns, now made me wonder what a genuinely ethnographic exploration of acting in such settings might be like, and what one might learn about the collaborative contexts of media production.

The anthropologist as extra

My assistant and I were on our second day at Bombay's Film City where one stage was given over to the production of a historical TV epic miniseries about a legendary courtesan named Amrapali. I wanted to learn more about the work of the crew, particularly those involved in costume and make-up, and so our work was directed primarily towards taking in the brisk activity amid the racks and trunks full of clothing and around the ad hoc sewing area. In the dressing room, surrounded by open boxes of costume jewellery, the costume designer broke from her description of how she had prepared for the series, and all of a sudden decided, without explanation, to dress me up for a walk-on role in the drama. She started

with a brown, curly wig. A few hairpins were necessary to secrete the few, straw-like effusions of my own hair. We walked to a door at the end of the dressing room that opened into a changing room with one full-length mirror glued to the wall. I changed into a dark brown, drastically shortened chiton. 'See, you are a Greek woman', she explained. Few flights of fancy could have been greater than the designer's plan to suggest me, with my sago-pudding pallor, to the director as a Greek woman, 'visiting the court with other women from other kingdoms'. To be exposed in a way that deviated sharply from my own sense of self-presentation was disarming, but gave me the chance to understand what a young Indian actress had meant when she described to me the frustrations of having to appear in ways that conflicted with her view of her character:

I always feel that the character doesn't necessarily have to dress up like this, and at times I feel it doesn't fit in with the character, I would like to speak up, but then at the same time I'm told that no... sometimes I do manage to get my way, sometimes I don't, sometimes I just wear it... I'm a new actress, and I'm doing a second lead role, I might not have much of a say, but if it's my fourth film, and I'm still doing second lead role, I might have a say. Extras, out of question, no say at all.

I sat around for another hour while more extras came and went from that same room, emerging in a variety of skirts, tops, and you-name-it, as the tailors and dressmen (costumers), heads down, stitched frantically away behind me. A few women, in small groups, chatted idly; others stood alone and silent. Now displaced from my accustomed position closer to the designer and dressmen, but not yet ready to launch myself into acting wholeheartedly, I did not quite know what to do, and sat quietly waiting for something more to happen. Ethnography, I have learned, has a way of turning the most abject humiliations into opportunities, and so after enough of us were dressed, and the director was ready, I allowed myself to be led by the hand down the steps from the dressing room to be placed at the end of the line of would-be extras in front of the director. Squinting at director and designer as they hurriedly conferred, feeling the heat of the sun on my shoulders, I heard little of the hushed and hurried conversation. The next thing I knew we were all trooping back to the dressing room. Whether the director didn't want me, or didn't want any of us, was never clear. My career as an extra, or more accurately a prop, ended before it truly begun. For the rest of the day, and the next, very little seemed to happen in the way of actual filming. I was never again asked to essay a Greek woman, or anyone else for that matter, although I did appear in a 'curtain raiser', a kind of preview feature that airs on television before the series proper to whet viewer appetites. All I had to do for that was to sit obediently (in my costume) in a chair while the designer described her vision of the series costumes with me as her model.

This was the extent of my 'acting career' in Bollywood, for good or ill. I do not think I am likely to be asked to be an extra again, given that I am quite a bit older than the youthful tourists, or even the redoubtable native-born 'strugglers' that are

preferred for Bollywood film. And yet those brief moments were both bracing and illuminating. Conjectures or second-hand opinions about acting, characters, costumes gave way to a brief moment of personal insight into these matters; and I was brought into an area of the set, in the midst of a cluster of practices I would not otherwise have witnessed. I had let myself become far more vulnerable than I had ever expected or wanted, but in the process I became involved in the intermeshed processes of construction and scrutiny that are elemental to acting. Not to any great or even small degree, of course, but enough to sense its possibilities in ways that few anthropologists have actually done.¹

Acting dilemmas

The value of participant observation is so firmly established in anthropology that it comes as no surprise that researchers occasionally make extraordinary efforts to stake a place *within* cultural processes as opposed to simply observing them from the outside. Many anthropologists have had experience with a comparable art or performance form at the point they commence their fieldwork. In fact, it is highly likely that some element of their arts background stimulated their anthropological studies in the first place (Feld, 1990; Wulff, 1998). In these cases, as Helena Wulff argues, memory of one's own performances can help inform analysis of others (Wulff, 2008) and assist in the anthropologist being regarded as a 'semi-native' (Wulff, 1998: 10). As a former dancer herself, she describes being invited to join her informants on stage, a sign to her that just as their performance gave meaning to their experiences, so they thought it might do the same for her (Wulff, 1998). Ethnomusicologists too find themselves invited to reciprocate musical 'offerings' with those of their own (Barz and Cooley, 1997: 17), and some develop good levels of proficiency.

In comparison, the ethnography of drama is marked by methodological restraint. Richard Schechner himself seems to have closed the door on what anthropologists could legitimately *do* by establishing a division of labour between theatre and anthropology that marked actors as actors, and anthropologists as 'trained observers', or 'evoker-observers' (Hastrup, 1992: 332). In her study of Shakespearean actors Kirsten Hastrup argues that, in the presence of professionals, it is better to be an 'accomplice' to the action than its author (2004). And in her work on Russian theatre actors, Alaina Lemon (2004: 325) largely excused herself from acting, choosing instead to 'sit[s] with the instructors'. Even when Johannes Fabian (1990) devoted himself to facilitating a theatrical performance in the field, he remained an observer, a co-writer at most, a kind of critic. And the critic, as Beeman (2007: 279) argues, is prevented from entering into the 'flow' of a performance by the obligation to observe and critique the performance.

As arguments against acting, these are eminently credible, yet it seems strange that while anthropologists enthusiastically put their hand to making things or playing instruments or even essaying some dance steps, the line is drawn at acting. This demurral becomes both puzzling and ironic when one reads

endorsements of participation in craft, performing arts, and even some rituals couched in theatrical terms as 'joining the cast of players rather than watching the performance from a front row seat' (Coy, 1989: 129). What is it that makes acting a less common recourse in ethnographic research?

There are a few exceptions to the general rule that anthropologists avoid acting, but their paucity and recent appearance testify to my point that acting is, and has been, comparatively unpopular as a methodological device. Kathleen Erwin (1999) found her way into playing the key role of the American wife of a Chinese character in a television serial as part of her study of shifting gender and marital meanings and practices in Shanghai. Karin Barber, in her exploration of a distinct Yoruba performative genre, took part in some television dramas and a number of the plays put on by the theatre troupe with which she travelled in western Nigeria (Barber, 2003). In a somewhat similar fashion, Katrien Pype (2008) was given parts to play in the televised performances of a group in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. Sylvia Martin's study of American and Hong Kong media production also involved work as an extra (Martin, 2009) and, finally, Sasha David (2010) explores the ways in which American actors negotiate the varied experiences of a professional acting life, including taking classes, attending auditions, and engaging in the critical exercise of 'networking'. Of these, Barber's work is the most sustained examination of dramatic structure and process, in keeping with her stated interest in how theatrical texts are the outcome of complex cultural practices that engage both actors and audiences. David, meanwhile, makes the legitimate point that, akin to the cliché about icebergs, most of what makes up the acting occupation are not the staged performances the audience sees but the social performances to ensure success that are largely concealed. Pype and Martin both confront the unsteady implications of what acting tells them about the interpretive constructions formed by the anthropological subject, but in neither case is acting the only or the main heuristic tool. Erwin too uses acting as one ethnographic strategy among several others (including working in a call centre) in work that is oriented less towards understanding media production than towards grasping conceptions of gender and modernity.²

The appearance of four pieces of research since 1999, two of them since 2009, all using acting as a methodological tool, surely owes itself to a renewed interest in the cultures of production as a reaction to the domination of consumption studies. Most work in this vein though roots itself in other forms of ethnographic engagement (e.g. Caldwell, 2008; Ganti, 2004; Grimaud, 2003; Wilkinson-Weber, 2010). Why acting should not have been favoured in the past, and why it still fills its practitioners with a sense of unease, is not answered. Perhaps scholars sense that the gatekeepers of the profession regard the exploration of certain kinds of performing arts more seriously than others (certainly Barber [2003] believes so). Participants in mass media acting, like film and television, may also have cause to worry about their performances living on beyond their fieldwork for interpretation by others, and not just themselves.

Another possibility is that there are fewer anthropologists with any kind of acting experience compared to musicians or dancers or, say, yoga students or practitioners of martial arts. Acting assuredly takes on different forms around the world, and there are different performative expectations within different genres even in a single culture. To the extent that dramatic characterization tends, as King puts it (1985: 36), toward the symbolic instead of the indexical or iconic, then the result is a 'formalistic regime' in which actor and role overlap very little (King's examples are Japanese Noh theatre and Chinese classical theatre). The problem for the anthropologist entering such situations would not be so different from learning dance or playing music as overt performances distinct in their very nature from the activities of daily life. But within the range of theatrical traditions extant in the world, there are many that demand far less in terms of physical motor skills than music or dance, and require less preparation before the would-be actor can start playing some sort of a role.³ This is not to say that in naturalistic acting there are not skills to be learned and applied: memorizing lines, assuming a character, interacting with other actors, rehearsing, not to speak of the ability to commodify the self in media industries (David, 2010). Where access to being an actor is based on competition, anthropologists must submit to gruelling and stressful auditions that are formidable enough already for committed actors. On the other hand, there is the consolation that bad acting abounds even among supposed 'professionals'. And whereas in music and dance, disrupting the frame is horrifyingly easy – play a wrong note, fall over, show some fundamental ineptitude – in acting, where one takes on a specific character, the frame is assertively constructed and, once constructed, is more tensile and dynamic. An actor can go 'off script', falling back on improvisatory skills and invented dialog to bridge the gap, and still remain convincing, for example.

Perversely, it is in its apparent easiness that one finds the source of naturalistic acting's threat for the anthropologist. Where any degree of naturalism is preferred, the action is expected to mirror reality, thus to play deliberately with the codes of everyday speech and behaviour. The paradox of naturalistic acting is nothing less than the radical displacement of self amidst the reproduction of activities that are part of the mundane flow of personal life (Naremore, 1988). In short, naturalistic acting's peculiar difficulty comes not from trying to do something new so much as extending and adapting what one already knows. Tacking back and forth over the line that divides the real from the theatrical could become unsettling for this reason: the majority of acting practices share the acceptance among players and audience that in entering into a relational frame with respect to other actors, the actor becomes someone distinctly 'other' with respect to the actual or anticipated audience, or to other agents in the art world that facilitate the performance (Beeman, 2007). More pointedly, the actor becomes 'what they are not' in their own and others' eyes (Hastrup, 1998: 30).

When actors become characters, they are, in Kirsten Hastrup's (1998: 38) words, 'double agents', simultaneously actors and characters, the latter never ceasing to

reflect upon the former. If the persistence of the actor into the 'life' of the character is to enable a constant monitoring between the two, what happens when a third component – the anthropological person – is added?⁴ Ethnography involves 'ongoing evaluation and restructuring of self in the light of interaction with others and reflection upon that interaction' (Davies, 1999: 81), in which adopting acceptable clothing, demeanour, and deportment is all of a piece with conforming to local sensibilities while being recognized as different. None of this, though, is the same as intensively developing a character that essentially co-exists with the anthropological self. To act in this manner would risk becoming someone else entirely, without retaining the bedrock identity of, as it is often put, the 'intimate stranger'. At the very least, the tension between the constructed anthropological persona, the acting persona, and the character might be expected to be extraordinarily tangled. Recalling my own all-too-brief moments under the lights, I know that my transformation from sober researcher to Greek woman in a revealing mini-skirt made further ethnographic inquiries extremely delicate, at least until I had turned back into my original form. If the role is one into which the anthropologist must delve deeply, one wonders how the overt 'otherness' of acting a character meshes with the inter-subjectivity of ethnographic fieldwork, given that anthropologists – unlike psychologists and some sociologists – scrupulously avoid deception as much as possible. Alternatively, perhaps it is one's peers and elders who are most concerned about deception, deeming the adoption of an acting persona as a distraction or a self-centred folly aimed at attracting undue attention rather than forging a creative approach towards gaining social and cultural insights.

Unavoidably, in terms of their professional stance, as well as their approach to their subject, anthropologists are still defined pre-eminently as watchful observers, and not absorbed performers. Agreeing with Kirsten Hastrup, Helena Wulff (1998: 9) insists that one cannot be simultaneously native and an anthropologist, arguing that the anthropologist's specific contribution is to contribute a 'theoretical understanding where the native point of view is included'. Anthropology has relied so much upon the employment of the visual modality – the anthropologist as observer – that even the forms of participation are closely guarded so that 'performances' never rise to the level of the personally unobserved. Acting in a sustained, intense role will continue to be extremely difficult for an anthropologist, no matter how able they are, because it necessarily entails limits upon reflexivity. And reflexivity requires detachment at some level, the insistence on the professional self supplanting the acting self, to paraphrase Davies (1999: 19), so that participation can take its proper place as a 'means of facilitating observation of particular behaviours and events' as opposed to an end in itself (Davies, 1999: 71). To step away from this stance, to elect instead for the immersion and personal dissolution acting potentially involves, reverses the equation. The anthropologist who is watched more than they watch may then turn into an object of professional suspicion.

The case for acting

Arguments for methodological innovation notwithstanding, it is apparent that strong currents of caution and discretion continue to run through anthropology. Moreover, if one concedes that writing, as Clifford (2010: 2) argues, is ‘central to what anthropologists do . . . in the field’, then more time performing means less time writing. Yet striking ethnographies have resulted from rich participatory practice in performing art (Chernoff, 1979; Kisiuk, 1998). Only in this way does the research take on immediacy and depth, and to ethnographers who have ever used such techniques, they offer crucial advantages over observation alone. Misgivings aside, why should anthropologists seriously consider doing acting as an aspect of their fieldwork? First, it is important to recognize that artistic participation is chiefly important as a means of learning and not expounding culture. Even the most devoted performer-anthropologists are forced to acknowledge that they are unlikely to be regarded as true ‘performers’, just as craft scholars will not rise above the status of journeyman. In other words, slipping away into a life of acting as opposed to a life of anthropological analysis is rather unlikely. Even if the performance form is regarded as an ecumenical one, living from performance would, in many instances, mean years of application, years of activity *as* a performer rather than an anthropologist, which is a professional state of being as much defined by the demands of institutional calendars and curricular needs as by fieldwork experience. Because of the normative immersion of anthropologists in what is at least nominally unfamiliar, anthropologists who actively engage in performance have generally gravitated toward describing *becoming* a performer, meaning that they dwell upon the experience of learning a set of expressive practices rather than actually *being* a performer. This is only natural, for in order to do something new one has to learn about it first.

James Kippen’s (1988) rich account of the culture of the *tabla* (a kind of Indian drum) in Lucknow, India, sprang from his adoption of the ascriptive role of apprentice musician. He tells us that he learned to play *tabla* ‘with the intention of becoming, as far as possible, a performer’ (Kippen, 1988: ix). We read that he played in public with fellow students, but his text is more concerned with describing the processes of learning, and the transposition of his musical knowledge into a scholarly, systemic form, than with describing the act of performing that was supposedly his goal. In a strange inversion of the emphases that would be more culturally appropriate (but which are fully in line with Goffman’s [1959] observation that the backstage is somehow more authentic, and onstage is a self-conscious charade), most performing anthropologists and social scientists have focused more on their lives offstage than onstage.

So, what can an anthropologist achieve through the process of ‘learning’ to act? The models offered by Erwin and Barber clearly lead the way in showing how more engaged acting practice can be used productively. In both cases, acting is not the only thing the ethnographer does during fieldwork, yet it has a distinct place within

the range of techniques each uses. Barber's work is an exemplar of how to investigate theatrical troupes (and tropes). She is primarily interested in how Yoruba plays are playful elaborations upon certain core themes or formulas that are creatively moulded through time and from audience to audience. Her vantage point as an occasional actor is critical for seeing how performances are built and composed, and not simply executed from a fixed script. The passing descriptions of the various roles she took, how she was fitted into the narrative, the audience preconceptions she was expected to play to, her growing ability to improvise, are extraordinarily revealing of the general procedures in place to mould well-known narratives to local and topical contexts. The modular character of the dramas is what allows the players to slot Barber into role after role (Barber, 2003). She is convinced that:

Only by listening over and over to successive renditions of the same play – from the auditorium, the stage, and the wings – by comparing recordings and transcriptions of recordings, and by reflecting on my own experience of playing a role in it, was I eventually able to get a sense of the growing points of a text, its areas of density and diffuseness, the principles of its repeated emergence. (p. 172)

In a different vein, Erwin draws on the management of her foreignness and her whiteness in a Shanghai TV production to generate insights into how Chinese familial relationships and gender identities vis-à-vis cultural 'others' are conceived and interpreted. Anecdotes reveal how her efforts to shape her prominent soap opera character more 'realistically' were rebuffed in favour of the characterizations more in line with the moral and rhetorical aims of the serials' makers (Erwin, 1999: 232). Most interesting, she describes how she was invited not to act, but 'be herself', as though her person sufficiently embodied the characterizations they sought without any internal or external adjustments (Erwin, 1999: 247). Aside from these and a few other anecdotes, though, Erwin says little about how she was able to act a character that was both 'her' (as the directors clearly perceived by telling her to 'be herself') and yet 'not her' in that she was required to embody a set of expectations about foreignness, whiteness and femaleness that were so distinct that she made them the subject of her anthropological analysis. In other words, what it was like to act as a result of or in spite of the director's exhortations is not explored. Erwin's central concern is not, after all, either performance or acting as ethnography, but a broader exploration of how the serial enacted contemporary tropes of transnational masculinity.

What might be the outcome of exploring not just the guiding narratives of the social lives of soap opera characters, but also what embodying a character means as both personal and professional practice? A fruitful fusion of the approaches of Barber and Erwin might cast light on the variety of embodiments that constitutes creating the 'real' in media. Almost all acting in mass media around the world leans towards a kind of naturalism that consists of 'framing interactions as if they were happening in the "here and now"' (Lemon, 2004: 323; see also King, 1985), but this

may not mean that the reality of the characters, and what and why they do what they do, would be equally compelling to audiences all around the world.

Consider, for example, the dominant 'actorly' strains in American film, the well-known and highly prestigious 'Method', and the Repertory or Broadway style of acting (frequently associated with British actors). Method acting originated with Constantin Stanislavsky in Russia but acquired its most enduring form in the hands of teachers in the United States. The Method requires actors to draw variously (depending upon the particular 'school' of the Method to which they have been exposed) upon internal resources of memory or emotional response so as to construct a character that is judged to be authentically oneself (David, 2010; Lemon, 2004), while the Repertory or Broadway style diverges from the Method by using observation, and the mastery of gesture and diction, to '[hide] behind the character' (Dyer, 1998: 158). Marlon Brando crops up in both of Dyer's categories, intimating that there may not be as much difference – in film at least – between the 'outside-in' techniques of 'Broadway and English repertory theater' and the 'inside-out' precepts of method acting as proponents of the latter insist. Together, the styles have helped define not just the proper forms of training for actors, no matter what kind of roles they get, but also the parameters of what realistic characters are supposed to be like.

Barry King's work on the political economy of stardom as 'an adaptive response to the limits and pressures exerted upon acting as a discursive practice in the mainstream cinema' uses the industrial logic of mass media to point out another critical component of acting practice (1985: 27). He starts by describing impersonation, an approach to acting associated with naturalism and born out of stage acting (and including both method and repertory techniques), that requires that the actor strive to embody the character in minute detail. In mass media, however, one also encounters personification, which arises as a particular response to the fragmentary performance forms that film and television represent (scenes shot out of sequence, images produced in part through technological means). In order to secure and defend their occupational positions, leading actors develop stable personalities and embodiments that can move inside and outside of media domains – in short, the very essence of stardom. Impersonation retains its cachet but may itself become integrated to the actor's persona. King (1985: 43) notes in reference to Robert de Niro, for example, that he:

...combine(s) to a stunning level of virtuosity the capacity for impersonation with a drive, role by role, to transform himself physically into the substance of the signified... (an) approach to acting... entirely consistent with an effort to adapt impersonation to the control relationships and techniques implied in film work.

King's work focuses exclusively on Hollywood and the conventions of Western media. But what are the dynamics in other industries where the theatrical antecedents, narrative expectations and notions of characterization differ? Borrowing from King, for example, Dwyer and Patel (2002) have argued that

personification exemplifies popular Hindi film acting to the exclusion of impersonation, in part because of the intense and expansive nature of Indian film stardom, in part also because the prevailing sensibility of melodrama thwarts Method-like realism.⁵ However, there is no ethnography of acting to either support or refute this argument. The convergence of dramatic framing, characterization norms, and industrial media processes in other contexts would be compelling topics for anthropologists to investigate.

Needless to say, anthropologists lack star personas that, according to King's (1985: 41) classification, represent the consummate 'articulation of person and image'.⁶ And yet they may well find that the physical and social attributes of the person they are (usually) perceived to be enter singularly into the characters they are invited to play in media settings, experiencing to some degree the importance of external characteristics that personification magnifies.⁷ Because of the greater continuity between the acting frame and the world external to the performance, and between the character and the actor, the actor or would-be actor is more often limited by looks and appearance in ways that other kinds of artists, from potter to weaver to dancer, are or ought not to be. Any acting ability will then take a backseat to overt identifiers of nationality, ethnicity, class, or gender. The now substantial scholarship amassed by ethnographers on sex industry performance, with its rich treatment of performance subjectivities and complex view of power relations, offers a comparative base for analysis (see Egan et al., 2006), and there is ample scope in this area for thinking further the implications of Butler's (2007) work on gender as 'performance' when transcribed into self-conscious acting arenas. What it is to be 'convincing', in other words, draws on a set of expectations and conventions not entirely dependent upon how 'good' the actor is considered to be in the exercise of their craft.

Centring on extras

Practically speaking, anthropologists in media settings are most likely to start with, or even continue participating at, the level of the extra or background artist (known as a junior artist in Bollywood). Disappointing (or comforting) as it may be not to be the centre of attention, the benefits of participation as an extra need to be seen as issuing directly from the subsidiary performer's subordinated performance status. First is the immersion in a level of the art world that is well populated, essential, and yet mostly overlooked in public discourse and academic critique. In becoming an extra, one becomes an entirely different kind of performer from the one normally thought of in acting. In Mumbai, junior artists are organized into associations that disburse, for a not inconsiderable fee, the membership cards that are the prerequisites for getting any kind of work. The scant accounts of the lives of extras in the Bombay industry make for depressing reading, focusing mainly on the gap between aspiration and actuality in the efforts of junior artists to get work, let alone become stars (Swaminathan, 2004). A 2007 film, *Om Shanti Om* (Khan, 2007), took on this theme in its story of a junior artist who, after failing to save the lead heroine

from being murdered by her husband, avenges her in his next birth. The first half of the film cleverly expounds on the trials, tribulations and dreams of the film extra, played with knowing irony by superstar Shah Rukh Khan. However, the impossibility of the junior artist's ambitions is only underscored by a second half in which the hero's revenge is only effected because he has been happily reborn into privilege, and is now a bona fide film star. In a book about the making of the film, a chapter is given over to junior artist life stories, describing how they are sorted into categories like 'Class A' or 'Super Class' depending upon their youth, size and how fair their skin is. Many hope to move on to better things; others are resigned to junior artist status indefinitely. Unlike David's actors and actresses, they have rarely invested in acting classes (Shiekh, 2008).

In American media productions the path to becoming an extra is highly formalized. One can now submit applications and credentials to agencies online, a tedious procedure in which one is required to imaginatively parcel out one's body and one's capabilities into the categories relevant to casting agents. These include body measurement, dress, shirt and shoe sizes, hair and eye colour, special talents (foreign languages, athletic abilities, and so on and so forth). One is expected to bring clothes suitable for casual, office, or evening wear that might be evaluated and deployed as costume. The behavioural expectations of extras on or offset are exhaustively spelled out in page upon page of advice and cautions, none of which deal directly with the actual acting itself. What is also interesting about these expository endeavours is the extent to which they attempt to objectify a code of professional standards and broadly understood practice conventions that are otherwise implicit within an industry where most people learn their most relevant skills 'on the job'. In this regard, the North American industry is no different from Bollywood.

Another benefit of extra roles is that they do not require that the anthropologist present substantial acting credentials, and yet carrying them out can illuminate the constraints within which all kinds of acting takes place. On a film set, the cast spans a far greater range of 'registers of dramatized action' (Naremore, 1988: 15) than they do on stage, for the simple reason that many scenes are shot so as to appear as imperceptible grafts upon everyday reality. This means that many more people are likely to be present in a scene, and those in the background share at least to some degree in the responsibility for maintaining the dramatic frame, even if their acting practice is distinct. Paradoxically enough, recurrent appearances in different scenes where extras are supposed to embody a different fraction of the 'real-world' population (part of the crowd in a street versus diners at a restaurant) are intrinsic violations of naturalism that produce reality at the same time as they belie it. Does an extra experience the 'doubling' Hastrup speaks of since they are not part of the dramatic interactions that seal a performance as 'actorly', or do they even experience being a 'character', especially as that character is dissolved and a new one put together in another scene? In truth, there is scant reference in academic literature to the acting aptitudes and attitudes of secondary actors unless they have to exhibit specific skills, for example as part of a dance sequence.

A gulf separates the extra that merely appears in the background from one that has some business to do, or lines to speak. Even then, it is by no means clear whether one is talking about a character so much as a cipher. The only cues that secondary actors are part of a dramatic frame are, first, they are in a costume (even if they are wearing their own clothes, these must be cursorily surveyed and authorized as costume), and second, that they follow directions.⁸ At the minimum they should not disrupt the frame either by ‘failing to act’ or ‘acting too much’. Certainly there is a perceptible switch from acting to not-acting in between takes, but what happens as the scene is shot? David’s remark that extras merely ‘pantomime’ talking or eating suggests a kind of acting that is highly self-conscious – normative for extras perhaps, but not for principals (David, 2010: 220).

Last but not least, there is the affinity of the extra’s positionality for the very specific form of ‘performance’ entailed in most ethnographic fieldwork. The extra is defined as a watcher, someone who frequents the edges because they cannot stake out the front and centre. Being an extra would draw one closer to more conventional anthropological engagements, to the extent that one’s overt, culturally acknowledged performances remain partial and submerged. Working as an extra, experiencing the long waits to start work, the disregard of more powerful actors, the more varied interactions with crew, would mean that the set opened up into a more conventional kind of field site, the performative ‘backstage’ (Goffman, 1959) filled with other extras, technicians and assistants. The extra’s place in all of this arguably permits a greater awareness of the collaborative work of cultural production, its existence as an art world in which many creative and improvisational labours are elaborately coordinated (Becker, 1982). In a view such as this, the social rather than personal and individual engagements that art involves become the focus, and art becomes a cultural practice in which many participants work cooperatively (or perhaps competitively) to generate products and performances (Becker, 1982, 2006). An actor’s performance in a film is one among a number of carefully coordinated activities (or ‘performances’) that precedes the cinematic viewing experience, itself a cultural performance of no little significance. The participatory components of film or television production are made obvious in the extensive credits that begin and end these kinds of media productions. But only now is work on the production practices of labourers (Caldwell, 2008) being joined to research already done on industrial elites (Dornfeld, 1998; Ganti, 2004; Powdermaker, 1950). Participant observation as an extra would be one means to learn more about the range of everyday practices that make up the life of the set.

In sum, I feel that it is past due for more anthropologists to experiment with the ethnographic persona of actor, whether this is as a key character or in a supporting role. Learning the conventions of performance in a variety of cross-cultural theatrical and media settings not only reveals something about expressive culture but also the social life of media practice, and the complex business of the construction of plausible characters and narratives. Conversely, it is time for acting to be taken as seriously as a fieldwork technique, just as music-playing has in ethnomusicology. Difficulties will no doubt persist. Acting, with its attendant presumption of putting

oneself on show, is not for everyone, and there remain other, highly valuable ways to find a position, and an identity (as Hastrup, who is quoted at the start of this article, notes). Still, by inhabiting both the shoals and the depths of the acting world, one might have the chance to try on other art world activities, what Wulff (1998: 10) terms ‘new kinds of nativeness’, rather than simply one. As anthropologists continue to craft and explore the ‘various forms of subjectivity’, as Okely puts it (1992: 28) observes, only more work in a performative vein can decide whether the anthropologist can justly take centre stage, hang back in the crowd, or remain in the wings.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to numerous friends, colleagues and reviewers who commented on my ideas, or on the article itself, at various stages of development. My thanks are also due to the film professionals who gave me my entrée on to film sets and television studios in Mumbai. The research upon which this article is partly based was funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies senior fellowship, and the College of Liberal Arts at Washington State University Vancouver.

Notes

1. I had extensive acting experience as an undergraduate student, as well as being involved in a range of behind-the-scenes jobs in amateur drama festivals and the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.
2. I do not think it just for me to comment extensively on the work of scholars like Pype or Martin whose conclusions are only recently being disseminated; certainly it is wrong to do so before they have a chance to elaborate more on these matters themselves. Both mentioned to me, though, feelings of discomfort associated with acting, which I would not expect to hear from students of dance or music.
3. From time to time, a special skill (like juggling or martial arts) might be asked of a potential extra.
4. Even more provocative are the presumptions that come to mind if one is cast, as Martin (2009) was, as a corpse!
5. Some Bollywood stars strive to be recognized as good actors. One of my interviewees described the efforts of the star Aamir Khan thus: ‘Sometimes an actor is so into their acting, that they let the actor become the star. In the case of Aamir Khan for example, he’s an actor who doesn’t let the star Aamir Khan come out as much as the actor.’
6. In this connection, it is worth noting that when celebrities appear ‘as’ themselves in films and television, they typically act rather poorly. They seem to wear their personal identity and professional status as a kind of costume (of speech, gesture, carriage and looks) that subverts any communication the assigned film costume may suggest. Typically the fault is underplaying, so that one doesn’t forget who they ‘really’ are – subordinating ‘acting’ to ‘self-awareness’. Indeed, if the acting were too good, we would be suspicious of them. I have in mind Princeton professor Cornel West’s brief appearances in *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions*, for example, where it is clear that for those that know, he isn’t Cornel West, but then again, he is not ‘not’ Cornel West either (particularly since his character is even named ‘Councilor West’).

7. Theatrical acting is able to accommodate greater flexibility in the match of body to character (for example, casting actors of differing ethnicities in Shakespeare productions), where film and television are arenas where a greater fidelity of 'looks' to character is generally preferred. This only tends to cover the grossest areas of physical resemblance – gender and ethnicity, for example – since it is a truism that real-life figures tend to be played by actors who are considerably better looking than they are.
8. Shiekh (2008: 46) describes junior artists as being 'known by the costumes they wear, hey white shirt, hey red pants'.

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