In Defense of Virtuosity

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IRVING PICHEL has directed more than thirty feature films, as well as films for television. Recently he directed the production of the first performance of David Tampkin's operatic version of *The Dybbuk* for the New York City Opera Company.

It is a matter of some curiosity that the screen has developed so few virtuosi. There are great numbers of highly skilled technicians, many talented performers, many directors of artistic intent and, indeed, accomplishment, but few with that exuberance of skill, that delight in the play of adeptness which marks those who work under rigorous disciplines. Virtuosity is not confined, of course, to artists, musicians, or performers in public. It appears wherever mastery of technical difficulties is so complete that its possessor can perform feats beyond those demanded by the tasks or problems to which his skill is ordinarily applied. Virtuosity in sports leads to all sorts of tricks; in science, it may lead to discovery and invention; in the arts, it yields a special kind of pleasure quite apart from the content of the work in hand. Considered in this sense, it may be regarded as the abstraction of skill.

I am inclined to look upon it as a mark of youth and vitality in the practice of the arts rather than as a sign of maturity and decadence. It is one of the early fruits of mastery, and so it is to be distinguished from a weary, sterile technical competence. It is the swagger of the child, delighted with the skill with which he walks. In the man, it is not merely walking, it is walking on a high wire. It is the juggler not merely juggling five plates but juggling ten, blindfolded. It is the superabundance of craft.

Wherever great skill develops, there is a strong temptation to make a show of it. The term "virtuoso" is usually applied only to pianists or violinists of uncommon prestidigital skill, since these performers in public have every opportunity to exhibit technical facility in excess of that needed to draw music from their instru-

ments. Indeed, such display is considered almost obligatory. The greatest composers, not content to write concertos of surpassing difficulty, usually provide a cadenza toward the end of the first movement during which the orchestra remains silent while the soloist demonstrates that he can do things with a piano or violin beyond the *musical* demands of what has gone before. Sometimes the composer leaves the composition of a cadenza to the soloist himself, or the soloist substitutes one of his own that is more difficult than the one provided by the composer. It is as though, having performed with sensitiveness and feeling and exaltation as a channel for the expression of what the composer has to say, the soloist is given a parenthetical moment of his own in which he is permitted to point out that, besides being able to play with beauty and understanding and skill, he can, if necessary, play twice as many notes twice as fast. This may have little to do with music but there is no question that it is enjoyable. It is, in effect, a certificate of the performer's qualification to play the music he has just played and that which is still to come. He tells us, "before I could become a musician, I had to master this instrument, these hands and fingers."

Audiences take delight in feats of dexterity or agility, quite apart from meaning. A troup of acrobats may entertain for twenty minutes with various feats of tumbling. Then comes a moment of silence. Five men get down on their hands and knees in a row. A sixth indicates by pantomime that he will jump over the backs of the five, turning three somersaults in mid-air. Impressively, he estimates the distance. The drum begins a roll which becomes faster and louder as the acrobat leaps into the air, turning over and over and over again, landing at last to a crash of the cymbal. He runs toward the audience, his arms outstretched. There is wild applause. The bullfighter, after a series of passes with his cape, looks toward the stands, circling about to call attention to what he is about to do. He then kneels in the path of the bull and without moving from his position, evades the charge of the animal. He

rises, contemptuously turning his back on the frustrated creature, and raises his arms toward the spectators who respond to his invitation with shouts. The coloratura sings her aria, ending on high *C* or *D* or *E,* the orchestra pauses to let the audience cheer, not because she has sung beautifully or because the aria is beautiful but because she has successfully achieved an incredibly high note. An ice skater may perform with the greatest apparent ease feats of grace and agility which can be enjoyed for their beauty of movement but there comes a moment when the skater executes a spin of such increasing velocity that his body becomes a blur to the eye. This is the moment that earns thunders of applause. Whatever beauty there may be in ballet dancing, what design and rhythm appear in its choreography, however capable it is of expressing emotion and ideas, there is always the moment of the seemingly impossible leap, the whirl *sur les points,* the exhibition of skill for its own sake that brings down the house. Possibly the skill that makes difficult things seem easy is greater, but the skill that makes seemingly impossible things possible is more admired. The late Artur Schnabel made little of the difficulties of playing Beethoven but, in private at least, made much of the supreme difficulty of playing the technically simpler Mozart. This, from the artist's point of view, was putting virtuosity in its place. From the spectator's point of view, it belongs in plain sight.

Virtuosity is pleasure-giving because it makes a clear distinction between the feat performed and the performer, measuring his ability against the difficulty of the feat, as standards and a crossbar make visual the challenge to a highjumper. It segregates the purely objective aspect of artistic accomplishment from the subjective, making manifest the difference between the artist as performer and as interpreter, between his perceptiveness and his perception. It is a claim on the part of the performer for recognition of *his* skill as distinguished from what challenges it—the work of a composer or the law of gravity or the moment of nature he wishes to paint or the awkwardly shaped block of marble from which, if he is

Michelangelo, he undertakes to carve a David. From the single point of view of technical skill, it makes any performer greater than his performance. Nor is this a mean aggrandizement, as it applies to the arts or to any undertaking in which technical mastery is a prerequisite. It endows its possessor with authority and validates his work. For there is no such thing, properly speaking, as a "mere" virtuoso. The term is misused if it suggests that abundant technique is unnecessary to the full realization of an artistic enterprise. And even works written chiefly to display virtuosity are turned to the uses of musical expression by the true virtuoso.

This whole question seems to me to have more than minor importance in the interpretive arts because it bears some relation to the mystery of personality, that quality of the performer that makes it impossible for him to be wholly lost in the work he is performing, that makes him in his own right arresting and more worthy of note than his fellows.

The virtuoso personality used to be quite common in the theater. Bernhardt may not have been as notable a Camille as Duse but she was certainly the more spectacular by virtue of the superlative things she could do with her exceptional voice, by her ability to use *herself* for the purposes of a role rather than to submerge herself for the sake of the play. Seeing her may not have been the same thing as seeing a play but was none the less an unforgettable experience. Sir Henry Irving was a virtuoso actor whose mastery was all the more apparent because there was so much to master, a lanky, lurching body and a curious, nasal voice that might seem the last materials in the world with which to create moments of startling beauty or high tragedy or electrifying theatrical effect. John Drew, of whom it was fashionable to say that he was always John Drew, was nevertheless a virtuoso in the delivery of the witty line, in the projection of that archetype of the gentleman-though-actor, a clear contradiction of terms in the period when his career began. Mrs. Fiske had virtuosity, so had

John Barrymore, so have Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne today. The great pity has been that many of these performers have too often been content to apply their technical skill to easy challenges, to the showy role rather than the difficult play.

Now, films are both a medium for acting and an instrument or collection of instruments the mastery of which requires great technical skills as well as affording considerable outlet for artistic expression. It is in the nature of the medium that the technicians shall remain invisible and so be denied the personal aggrandizement the actor earns. Unhappily, they have outstripped in virtuosity those whom it is their main task to make visible and audible. Since they employ instruments of precision with predictable functions, they are accustomed to the idea of technical discipline, of the mastery of the utmost capacities of their tools—the lights, cameras, sound recorders, optical printers, the sensitivity of the film itself. They constantly explore further possibilities in the expressive use of these instruments and functions. They invent new effects, new combinations, even new machines. Yet, insofar as film is largely employed to record an illusive reality, the virtuosity of the technician-artists must conceal itself more completely, must abjure the moment of revelation which the cadenza so frankly grants to the violinist or pianist. The virtuosity of these reality-makers appears overtly only when they are set the task of making real what is patently impossible. In *The Day the Earth Stood Still* we see a disintegrating ray shoot from under the visor of a robot and reduce a machine gun and the soldier who mans it to a heap of incandescent ash. We see this happen before our eyes with complete "reality," though we know that, at this moment (though possibly not next year or even next month), nothing of the sort is possible. We ask ourselves how the trick is done. For the purposes of the fantastic tale, we accept the event as having taken place though we know it is a trick which we enjoy and admire for its sheer bravura. In the early days of film, Meliés, a French magician, made film do what nature cannot, and today we look to films that

represent what science cannot yet do for equivalent demonstrations of technical virtuosity. For those who are aware of how film images are constructed, the cutter occasionally is recognized as a virtuoso, as in *Desert Fox,* where he creates, out of innumerable two-foot flashes of film, the battles that raged across North Africa.

On rare occasions, the technician's virtuosity complements that of the visible performer, as in the scene in *A Royal Wedding* in which Fred Astaire dances up the side wall of a room, across the ceiling, and down the other side.

The virtuoso director is a rarity today. Von Sternberg was once such a director, as were René Clair and Serge Eisenstein. Our first-rank directors of today, men like Stevens, Wyler, Ford, Capra, or Kazan, are distinguished as screen storytellers rather than as film makers, though all of them are technically expert. They are realists whose first concern is with character and story and who find the accepted conventions of camera angle, shot sequence, and cutting adequate to their purposes. Only Alfred Hitchcock, whose stories are frank artifices, seems to enjoy his own ingenuity and technical resourcefulness to the point of letting both appear as secondary performers in his pictures. Such moments were the intercutting, in *Strangers on a Train,* of the desperate struggle of the tennis match with slow, agonizing efforts to recover the cigarette lighter, and the final sequence on the runaway merry-go-round. In his first two pictures, Orson Welles showed marks of filmic virtuosity, eclectic as it was.

Among performers, there has been only one notable virtuoso, Charles Chaplin. Quite apart from the fact that he is the creator of his own material and a perspicuous commentor on the mortal scene, he is an incredibly deft, exact, and accomplished pantomimist whose precision of execution adds immeasurably to the delight of watching him and, indeed, to the apprehension of what he projects. Though his virtuosity is as self-centering as that of an acrobat, it does not lower his stature as an artist but enhances it simply because it sets him apart from the content of his creation.

That there is only one player of the caliber of Chaplin may be due to the fact that there is in film acting no recognized tradition of discipline. Nobody has taken the trouble to determine what the screen actor must study, must learn, must practice to the point of easy expertness. It may be that the utter verisimilitude of the average film has no room for the kind of acting that is aware of the difference between the character and the performer and must forswear all method beyond mimicry. If this be true, we shall have to look to musical films and fantasies for what is inescapable in even the most realistic stage play—the constant awareness that there is a difference between the realistic and the real, along with the essential fact that there is a difference between the actor and the role, between the performer and his creation.

I do not suggest that the future of the realistic film lies with the virtuosi, but I question the maturity of the medium until its technicians and performers acquire an overflow of competence which is plainly visible and which gives pleasure for its own sake. This is no plea for greater artifice but rather for more art, for less mimicry and more imitation in the Aristotelian sense. It asks that those who make films show their delight in their profession for all to see.