



BREATHING THINKING LOOKING ACTING

» ROSS GIBSON

ONLY IN THE CONDUCT OF OUR ACTION CAN WE FIND THE SENSE OF MASTERY OVER THE FATES. — JOSEPH CONRAD, *NOSTROMO*¹

In the late 1950s, Frank O'Hara was working at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, vamping in the town's literary scenes, mapping his bohemian milieu onto the MOMA high society and, in treasured spare moments, filling notebooks with demotic lyrics that seem casual on first encounter but sound pitch-perfect the more they are re-read. Every lunch hour, with all Manhattan at his disposal, O'Hara would wander—north, south, east, west, up the skyscrapers and down the subways—tracing a new line each day through the massed options of the island, absorbed in the pulses of the gridded borough. From this process he composed the beguiling *Lunch Poems*.²

In his exertion he would sometimes arrive at a still epiphany, which would become the main ingredient of a lunch poem. The epiphany was never anything so quaint as 'a green thought in a green shade';³ for O'Hara was the city poet, the bard of hot dogs, record shops and gunk. But often a walk, in this city so depleted of verdure, would lead to a moment of intensified perception or poignancy, a sense of connectedness that oriented him happily so he could give words to some sensible trail that he had divined through the messy signs and flummoxes of the metropolis. No green thoughts

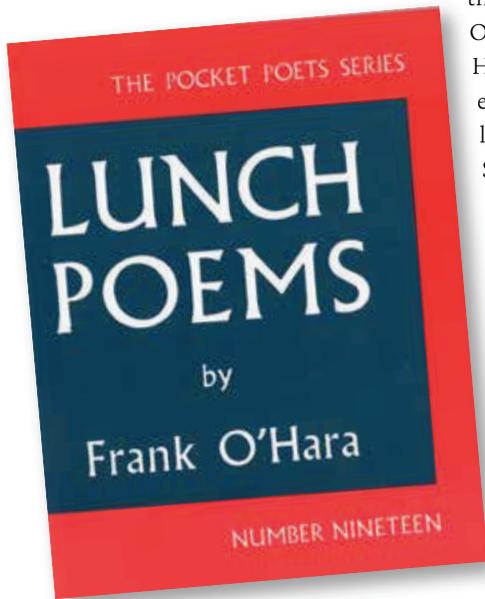
to guide him, therefore. Instead: *breaths*. The tenuous, connective trade of expiration and inspiration. And moments of breathlessness. And moments that take your breath away.

For example, in July 1959, O'Hara was spurred to write 'The Day Lady Died', after a walk in which he had spied a newspaper headline that reminded him of the time he had recently heard Billie Holiday in one of her final performances, accompanied by the great pianist Mal Waldron:

then I go back where I came from to
6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre
and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a
carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with
her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and
thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the
keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped
breathing⁴

O'Hara conjures the scene palpably. Off the present-time sidewalk now, and in the recent-time bar with him, we sense an entire congregation being affected and unified by Holiday's almost-gone life-breath of song. We feel the audience becoming a muted organism that is floated into suspended animation by



the performance. In O'Hara's evocation, Holiday's breathy, expiring voice fixes the listeners' inspiration. She changes the way her audience, and O'Hara's readers, are in the world. Or more precisely, her performance moves the world through the listeners in a new way as everybody's access to breath—the animus of existence—gets altered while

Holiday finesses the air. (Let's remember that 'breath' and 'spirit' are words for the same mystery. Inspire-expire-inspire: this rhythm keeps breath in our body and so keeps us spiritual as well as merely material.) Imagining themselves into the scene, readers can feel some meagre but sustaining ether parlay back and forth within each person and around the subtly animated room as Lady Day whispers 'to Mal Waldron and everyone' at the same time as 'everyone and I stopped breathing'. The syntax of the poem drops and catches its own breaths in response to the performance. The verse flutters a couple of ways as the word 'everyone' wafts back and forth in the sentence, pressing sense in two directions while Holiday's tenuous vitality infuses and transforms the atmosphere around her.

With her sparse, aestheticised breath rendering her almost anaesthetised, Holiday helps O'Hara know some rhythm of life. She helps him know this vital rhythm in his lungs and his blood because her rarefied vitality can be felt all the more keenly while her death—the expiry of her breath—is so

close in her inspired performance. All this stems from Holiday's manipulation of the way breath can be made active, meaningful and affective in the particular aesthetic medium of vocal performance. She acts on the air as she organises ideas and emotions with exquisitely uttered noise.

All human action is in some way a manipulation of breath. Anyone performing an action expends energy that is fuelled partly by the air. Live performance is such an action and it can alter the aspirations of the performer and the audience. Recorded music can do the same, even in the absence of the actual body of the original performer. And in film, where the ventilating body of the actor is only virtually present, a performance can press into a witness's flesh and nerves. The body of the spectator can be changed in its spirit. Which is to say, witnessing an inspired film performance can affect your breathing, your pulses, tempos and temperatures.

Film actors and editors know how to conduct the action of breathing. For these artists, breath is a 'raw material'; it is an element of nature that can be shaped aesthetically into versions of bodily experience so that patterns of thoughts and emotion can be conveyed in artistic output. By trimming breath into patterns of duration, emphasis and repetition, an actor or an editor can package cues for sensations that are not merely the by-products of living, not merely reactions to the randomness of experience. Rather, the representation of controlled breathing can be the product of deliberate thought and feeling, deliberate artistry. In other words, controlled breathing is one way to apply *significant form* to the raw matter of everyday experience.⁵

It is not only breath that gets deployed this way. The American filmmaker Walter Murch sees this work-on-the-world also occurring in actors' *looks*. When he edits, he tries to tune in to the governing dynamic of a scene. He often finds himself taking instruction from the way actors are blinking, for the eyes show a great deal about how an actor is working to make sense, to think-and-feel productively in response to the dramatic complex of propositions that make up a scene. Murch understands the shuttering of an eyelid this

(above)
Cover of the 1964
City Lights edition
of *Lunch Poems*, by
Frank O'Hara.

way: 'the blink is either something that helps an internal separation of thought to take place or it is an involuntary reflex accompanying a mental separation that is happening anyway.'⁶ In linguistics, of course, *the sentence* is commonly presumed to be the mechanism facilitating the 'separation of thought'. But Murch is suggesting that the human body, particularly in its neuro-optical system, works comparably. He maintains that the time between blinks is closely related to the duration of a single, attained thought. Blinking therefore marks the tempo of a person's cognition and composure. The way an actor is blinking is a reaction to the stimuli in the scene and it is also symptomatic of an attempt to govern the scene, including all its other blinking participants. The pattern of blinking within a scene tells us something about the *agency* of all the various people therein. According to this logic, a well-composed person will be measured in their

participation rather than observation. It can prompt you into willing suspension of disbelief because it puts a version of the actor's exertion and composure into your body even as it puts your virtualised body into the screen-space for a time, into worlds other than your own. Thus you gain the impression that you are palpably immersed in the compelling world of the drama. With your body, as well as your mind, you can sense the imaginary world coursing through you even as the actor is moving through that world for you. The actor is your representative, breathing you and blinking you and thereby extending you and helping you inhabit experiences other than your own.

Many modes of exertion and composure are regimes of breath. Yoga is one. Sport is another. Great sportspeople learn to marshal their active presence (and sometimes their panic) through the regulation of their breath so that respiration becomes a generator of efficient

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gaze—steady-eyed, unruffled; a person in panic, anger or confusion will be blustered, blinking like a shutter in a gale.

Murch's insight about blinking brings clarity to the way breathing works in meaningful performance. Along with looking, breathing is the actor's most basic resource for generating dramatic impact. Through the management of breaths and blinks, an actor can make culture from the messy flux of nature. Breath and looks are props, perhaps, but they are so integral to the actor's body that you, the spectator, do not perceive them to be part of the 'kit' used in 'actor's business'. By concentrating on the eyes and the aspiration of the actor, you can feel assimilated to the performer. Editors know how to emphasise this feeling. Attuned to the performer's blinks and breaths, you can get a sense of the rigours that the performer is supposed to be 'processing'. So closely felt, so *embodied*, this 'by proxy' process of simultaneous breathing, blinking, thought-forming and acting can feel like an immediate experience for the spectator. It can feel like

energy. They measure, array and enact their energy. In the mastery of their inspiration, we see the conduct of their actions. Exertion produces breathing, yet careful breathing can also produce finesse in exertion. When we watch a body in performance, we watch its breathing, and most crucially we also personify that breathing. Performers with strong presence can get us breathing (and blinking) in sync with them. As we experience their corporeal mien, we also get inklings of their thoughts and feelings. We get these inklings in our bodies, nervously, optically and in the lungs and capillaries. As we feel ourselves occupied and altered by the bodily rhythms of another, we get the measure of these exemplary people, these actors. This is active presence, with dramatic agency. And with bodily poise.

Breath becomes even more transformative when it is regulated in and by sentences of speech. The performance of oratory can be inspiring. Literally so. Thrillingly so. And distressingly so, such as when the presence of an effective demagogue can commandeer the

energies of massed listeners. Inspiring orators, for good or for bad, take our own breath away at the same time as they puff us up with their spirit as they deliver the sentences that carry their thoughts through the air.

In the history of cinema, there are millions of these orations. They are the DNA of the talkies. They are a force that scriptwriters yearn to summon and actors hanker to enact. To understand this driving-force of performance, let's examine a particular cluster of actorly sentences, to know a little more intensively how acting and editing work on the aspirants who watch and listen and breathe in the dark. The example is a monologue, the famous shark story, by Orson Welles in *The Lady From Shanghai* (1948, directed and co-written by Welles).

How to replay this scene on the page? I have to translate it out of its bodily enactment and describe it so that you can imagine its rhythms

and test my contentions the next time you see-and-hear the film. The sequence plays like this:

A beach party is in progress. Welles's character, a sailor named Michael, has detached himself from the society folks who have employed him as the skipper of their luxurious yacht. When summoned to join the festivities, he walks away from the seashore and finds them all lounging and squabbling in a makeshift picnic-camp. He stands and considers them for a moment and then decides to let them have it, working them over with thoughts and images breathed out in a musical pattern of sentences, runs of staccato breaths followed by melodic, attenuated utterances:

Is this what you folks do for amusement in the evenings? Sit around toasting marshmallows and calling each other names?

(below)

Frame enlargement from *The Lady from Shanghai*, 1947, written and directed by Orson Welles.



Sure, if you're so anxious for me to join the game, I can think of a few names I'd like to be calling you myself. [PAUSE] D'you know, once, off the hump of Brazil, I saw the ocean so darkened with blood it was black. And the sun fading away over the lip of the sky. We'd put in at Fortaleza and a few of us had lines out for a bit of idle fishing. It was me had the first strike. A shark it was. Then there was another. And another shark again. Till all about, the sea was made of sharks. And more sharks still. And no water at all. My shark had torn himself at the hook. And the scent, or maybe the stain it was, and him bleeding his life away drove the rest of them mad. Then the beasts took to eating each other. In their frenzy, they ate at themselves. You could feel the lust of murder like a wind stinging your eyes and you could smell the death reeking up out of the sea. I never saw anything worse. Until this little picnic tonight. And you know,

there wasn't one of them sharks in the whole crazy pack that survived.

Michael's monologue is an oasis of stillness and lucidity in a maddening, hyperactive film that is jagged throughout with verbal abuse and turbulent picture-cutting where huge scale-shifts, eye-line mismatches, and spatial discontinuities mug the viewer exhaustingly. Here in his monologue, for a few minutes, Welles settles the world down and tells something that seems to come from the centre of all experience. He takes a moral stand and, in a couple of senses of the word, he makes a *spiritual* point.

How does this happen? Through editing, sound-mixing and lighting, certainly. But, principally, everything is regulated by Welles's bodily tempo. For the duration of the monologue, everything on the screen and in the soundtrack picks up his beat so that the

(below)

Frame enlargement from *The Lady from Shanghai*, 1947, written and directed by Orson Welles.





represented world ‘tunes in’ to him. It all starts when Michael is summoned to the picnic. As he turns away from watching the undulating sea—waves coming in and out like the pulse of the world—he exhales cigarette smoke which shows his breath like a substance you could weigh, then he ditches the butt and walks through a couple of musical changes in the soundtrack. He strides toward his meeting, taking with him nothing but his self, his breathing self. The smoke he expelled was a stuffy signal, alerting us to the palpable effects that he can breathe forth.

When Michael arrives at the picnic, he stops, settles and then does not move anymore, except for the minimal actions of his talking and respiring. No. More precisely, there is the action of his glancing too, which takes some time to calm down—his eyes flitting for a while then focusing—in phase with his breathing. But as the scene progresses, his breath quickly

predominates and he casts his distilling influence over the audience in the picnic and the audience in the cinema.

Who makes up this composite audience, apart from us in the cinema? We see the wealthy, embittered Arthur Bannister (played by Everett Sloan), kvetching as he’s rocking nauseatingly in a hammock. There’s the toady lawyer Arthur Grisby (played by Glenn Anders), buffeted and jittery as he agitates a cocktail canister amidst the nasty banter. And Arthur’s wife, Elsa (played by Rita Hayworth), pale and barely alive, it seems, as she endures the squabbling. As Michael takes his position, the camera settles at last and gathers calm after the editing has been throwing the viewer through a range of perspectives within the emotionally turbulent space he has just entered. The participants in picnic-space and the audience in the cinema-space fold into each other while slowly the camera and Grisby and Bannister are

(above)

Frame enlargement from *The Lady from Shanghai*, 1947, written and directed by Orson Welles.

immobilised by Welles's talk as the evermore focal Elsa listens and does nothing more than breathe. And if you take time to monitor *yourself* as you watch and hear the scene, you will notice slight modulations in your own pulses as every rhythm in the scene slides over to Welles's tempo. In a delightfully strange sensation, you feel yourself become the breathing of both Welles and Hayworth. You feel your body being dispersed, infiltrated, altered and calmed into batches of suspended animation that you can identify only as something other than the self you walked into the movie-house.

How does Welles command such attention and imitation here? Partly, it is simply a somatic response: we attune ourselves to the rhythm of the focal point in our immediate experience. Finding the governing force in the immediate environment, for the purposes of self-preservation, we *heed* this force. (Ironically, in this case, self-alteration rather than preservation is the cardinal outcome of the attunement.) But to garner the force, the film must first convince us that Welles is focal and transformative. How does this happen? Why do we opt to transfer some of our being to him?

In the case of *The Lady from Shanghai*, the answer is to do with a moral force that gets generated through the film's management of the spirit or breath of the world. Welles is telling an allegory, a tale that issues from a centre of worldly wisdom, and he is telling it in such a way that the audience sees and hears the entire world 'lock in' around him. Even more spell-like, the spectator feels the borders between the world and the self blur as the spirit of the picnic-space and the spirits of several cast members infiltrate the attentive spectatorial body that is breathing in the darkness of the cinema. By attuning to the breath of Welles's character, the spectator becomes a participant in the scene. At the picnic-ground, once Welles settles and begins his burred oration, all extraneous noise quietens; the theatrical, rhythmic brogue of his patter amplifies and is brought to the aural foreground in the sound-mix; in regular medium-close-ups, Hayworth's luminous body rises and falls subliminally for him; Anders settles down; Sloan's hammock stops swinging.

As he channels his breath into the mesmerising language and parcelled diction of his story, the actor (aided by the editing) generates the impression that he exerts a moral force that emanates, through the resonating air, from his speaking position. In their nervous and respiratory systems if not in their cerebration, the audience senses that, at least for the duration of this particular performance, Welles's character governs the spirits of this mortal coil. By steadying down the aspirations of the world he has stepped into, Welles seems to gain mastery over the Fates. He performs spiritually for us and transforms the spirituality—the complex of breathing that binds and vivifies us—of the cast and the audience till finally, in a miraculous moment, Welles ends the tale by muttering, 'I'll be leaving you now' and then, as he turns to go, cosmically on cue, the sea behind him utters a whooshing sigh as a perfect little wave breaks on the beach. It is as if *the world* has just realised that it has been holding its breath. As a spectator, you sense the end of a stint of 'possession'. Once the wave has fallen, the world syncopates and goes skittish again. You get your own breath back, and you worry and wonder about surrendering yourself so completely ever again.

It's a disturbing moment: waking up from this possession. You feel yourself change—which is always a challenge and a stimulant for the political portion of one's imagination—but you also feel how you have acquiesced and lost vigilance—which is always the objective of the demagogue. Ultimately, this is the great importance of a performance like Welles's. In the transition moments—when you slide in and slide out of the spirited actor's 'spell'—you realise that alteration is possible, that you can change the way you inhabit the world, the way you act on it and absorb it.

As Frank O'Hara discovered after Billie Holiday's expiring performance in the 5 SPOT, being under the spell of a skilled performer can lead you to losing or to trading your consciousness. The truly transformative moment, the moment when you understand that you and the world can be changed, is when you gasp for your own breath again and realise that you have to take back responsibility for your own vitality. Billie Holiday was so close



to death that she took everyone at the 5 SPOT over to the edge of existence and helped them realise how delicate and precious life can be. At the picnic-ground, Welles comes so close to controlling the world that the spectator suddenly realises how vital it is to be engaged in the turbulence, to get up out of the hammocks that cosset the decadent shark-people who seem to rule the world.

A performance can take your breath away, but it is at its most vital when you demand your spirit back. As Joseph Conrad wrote, in his seafarer's tale of *Nostromo*, we must learn to conduct our own action if we want to tussle with the Fates. And it is with the spirits that the Fates fuel their actions. ¶

(above)

Frame enlargement from *The Lady from Shanghai*, 1947, written and directed by Orson Welles.



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1. Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo: A Tale of the Seaboard* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1924), p. 66.
2. Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1964).
3. The reference is to Andrew Marvell's poem, 'The Garden', first published 1681.
4. O'Hara, 'The Day Lady Died', in *Lunch Poems*, p. 26.
5. See Clive Bell's influential essay, 'Art and Significant Form', first published in Bell's book *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914). The essay is currently freely available on the excellent website of the late Dennis Dutton: <<http://denisdutton.com/bell.htm>> [accessed 5 January 2013].
6. Walter Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye: A Perspective on Film Editing* (Sydney: AFTRS, 1992), p. 60.