# Afterword: The Sociology of a Movie Actor

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For a sociologist, studying the art of an individual seems to be a peculiar idea. In the discipline that makes social collectivities its subject, focusing on one person would not tell much about, e.g., class or nation. Yet the tradition of the sociology of art contains a significant number of works concentrating on prominent individual representatives of creative professions. Beginning with Georg Simmel's analyses of works by Rembrandt van Rijn (Simmel 2005), through Theodor Adorno's essays on Arnold Schönberg and Igor Stravinsky (Adorno 1974), to Norbert Elias' (2006) study of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, sociologists used individual artists and their works as points of departure for the depiction of broader social phenomena. The artist's life and work can be an example of broader collective practices or their ideal types. Within the tradition of sociological pragmatism, studying individuals through inductive reasoning, comparing the cases, and building categories upon the results of these comparisons is actually an example of a methodical approach. Qualitative research often focuses on unique cases, which is in stark contrast to its quantitative counterpart, which focuses on a statistical distribution of features in the population.

The idea of studying an individual actor somehow corresponds to the sociology of the artist, but not without several objections. Although this approach is more about building generalizations about the artist as a member of society, certain components of this perspective can be applied to the case study of a concrete person working in a creative occupation. There is even a discussion about the scope of such generalizations, since the application of socio-demographic traits to the analysis shows that there is a significant difference between careers of women and men in the artistic

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field (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2018). The artist's status is also related to the historical context (Golka 2012; Luhmann 2016), thus it is difficult to write a 'pure' sociology of the artist. A minor lack lies in the fact that the phrase 'the sociology of the artist' usually relates to visual artists and writers, which is why it needs to be reconsidered in order to fit the specifics of performing arts.

Marian Golka's (2012) approach [despite its lack noted by Ewelina Wejbert-Wąsiewicz (2018)] makes a good point of departure for further analysis. His idea of the sociology of the artist utilizes several perspectives that – if used simultaneously, i.e. as a kind of theoretical triangulation – have the potential to strengthen the study. Artists are connected to the period in which they live and work. They are perceived through certain collective representations (e.g. artistic myths) existing in different historical periods. Those cultural objects also influence the way in which they perform their social roles. However, the sociology of the artist is not only about 'being' the artist, but also about 'becoming' one, as well as about whole careers. Finally, the sub-discipline does research on the social environments in which artists function. Building on these, I will discuss my own approach to the sociology of the artist, one which remains in accord with that of Sharaf Rehman and which will be driven mostly by the tradition of sociological pragmatism (e.g. Znaniecki 1965; Mead 1972; Fine 2004; Blumer 2007; Becker 2008; Strauss 2008).

There is one more specific circumstance related to the topic that might be a source of uncertainty. Sociological literature maintains that the concept of a (social) role, one of the most fundamental terms in the discipline, derives from theater or movie context. Florian Znaniecki (1939; 1965) provides

a clear link between a theatrical role and a social one. Erving Goffman (2000) applies to his analysis of social self not only the role itself, but also some other theater-related terms, such as front stage or backstage. Borrowing the term from other fields is nothing unusual. Sociologists use concepts derived from everyday language or different scientific disciplines (e.g. 'field' or 'capital'). However, in this particular case, the notion of a social role, conceptualized and designed as a tool for the analysis of social phenomena, is moved back to the study of the social world of movie. This brings some theoretical and practical issues that will be the topic of my considerations.

## A pragmatic perspective on the sociology of the artist

The moment of recognizing the relationship between the film role and the real-life role makes a good starting point to the whole analysis. With regard to this, the following issues need to be discussed:

1. What is the difference between a movie role and a social role?

2. Is the role theory adequate to analyze the role of a movie actor?

3. How should a sociologist study the role of a movie actor?

4. How can the role of a movie actor fit into the broader context of sociological considerations?

*With regard to the first question*, Znaniecki provides some remarks which an art sociologist can find useful:

Like a theatrical role, a social role involves continual interaction between the performer and other people. The analysis of both roles shows that they are systems of values and activities practically standardized in accordance with a certain pattern in the theatrical role, these are aesthetic; in the social role, social. A further important difference is that in a theatrical drama the role is created by the dramatist once and for all: Hamlet is the same role in each particular performance though different actors may play it differently. In social life each person enacts his own separate role; the roles of many particular physicians, merchants, or housewives are only similar because, and in so far as, they follow the same cultural pattern recognized as binding in certain collectivities. (1939:806)

The themes which should be considered include the **actor's agency** and **cultural references** that shape the performance and are a subject of evaluation. What is also important in Znaniecki's input is the **processual aspect** of the role, i.e. it is performed and needs constant **cooperation** with other people (a social circle). In another comparison (Znaniecki 1965), the author describes the difference between the two role types in a more elaborate way. Two factors are of importance here: types of references and the extent of agency, both of which remain in correspondence. Since the most significant source for a theatrical performance or a movie actor's performance is a script or a literary work, he/she is more limited than the real-life person, who is guided by some moral obligations toward other members of his/her social circle. Using Antonina Kłoskowska's (1981) typology, the former is guided by elements of symbolic culture, while the latter – by social culture.

However, for a researcher of a movie role, this simple difference between the theatrical role and the social role is not enough, since the actor is engaged in several social circles (Zimnica-Kuzioła 2020). For example, one should consider the distinction between the **actor as a character** and the **actor as a participant in a certain social world**. In both cases, he/she cooperates with some people – often with the same ones – e.g. fellow actors playing different Shakespeare characters in the same stage drama, although they use various references in different situations. People and cultural patterns organize interaction and help to define situations. In his study into role-playing games, Gary Alan Fine (1983) applied Goffman's frame theory to structurize different contexts in which participants enacting their everyday roles and their fantasy characters function. This can be helpful for understanding how both the theatrical role and the social role work. One person can voluntarily switch between frameworks. A good example is a rehearsal, i.e. when actors try to enact a scene and then discuss it. First, they are their characters who perform by means of addressing the other personae (e.g. Hamlet speaks to Ophelia); second, they analyze their performances by referring to the script and the actors' workshop (e.g. too expressive, too quiet, too little emotions). Besides this context, however, they can also be mothers, fathers, members of the society for the care of homeless animals, etc.

*With regard to the second of the aforementioned questions,* by studying social roles, one can distinguish, understand, and describe different systems of values. A movie actor's performance is evaluated by other actors, directors, fans, critics, or discussed during theatrical academy classes. A sociologist's task is not to judge the enacting process itself, but, rather, to study it as a cultural object constituting a central point for a system of social practices (Ossowski 1966). As cultural systems, the theater and

the movie are both objects of interest of different sciences (Znaniecki 1963). As organized conglomerates of values, they are references for the people involved in particular social worlds. For sociologists, however, they are interesting as values recalled by actors and other participants of those different social worlds. Every such configuration needs to be analyzed separately. I will follow this issue in the further part of the paper.

Contrary to the critics of the role theory [Raewyn Connell (1979) even states that it is not a sociological theory at all], I assume that its proper conceptualization makes it a useful analytical tool. Since there is not much space for a detailed analysis of all allegations against its use, I would like to enclose all of them in one statement: the criticism concerns the functional-structuralist idea of the social role, i.e. a perspective that builds upon the ideas of Ralph Linton (1936; 2000). Social roles are assigned to fixed positions located within a social system. Such a position has a predefined status as well as patterns regulating actions undertaken by the person who assumes a certain role. Society compares the performance with the pattern and decides whether it reflects it or not – an ahistorical story about socialization to a conservative society that exists in equilibrium. The question of people who do not fit in their role requirements – or the issue of 'role innovators' – takes little or no space within this narrative. It is, therefore, not surprising that it becomes an object of attack from more critically-oriented authors. Although the theatrical role or movie role – the types that use an already existing cultural text as a reference – seems to be close to the functional-structuralist concept, there still is much room for individual or collective interpretations. This is not enough to accept it as a theoretical framework for this analysis.

Znaniecki's contribution to the role theory allows one to avoid the above-mentioned weaknesses of the structuralist perspective. His inductive, empirical approach is based not on the idea of a role itself, but, rather, on its actual performance. This also refutes the allegations of ahistoricism, since Znaniecki studied the development of roles manifesting in specific historical contexts. He also criticizes another component of Linton's contribution, namely the fixed status – as discrepant from the dynamic fundaments of social phenomena. According to George Hebert Mead (1972), it is more about 'role-taking', and, as John Urry (1970) suggests, it is more about 'improvising' on the basis of certain social and cultural references than about enacting something from a cultural script. The actual enactment of the role is the result of negotiations between the person and his/her social circle. A successful performance of one's duties needs the support of others, which corresponds to certain rights granted toward that person. Znaniecki (1963) rejects the axionormative understanding of the social order and includes not only those aspects of social relations that support harmony and are positively evaluated from society's power structures, but also those that are perceived as a threat to the order thus understood. His perspective might be called 'constructivist' or 'discursive'.

*As to the third of the aforementioned questions constituting the point of departure for this article* – following Znaniecki's ideas, a sociologist needs to study particular enactments of a role in order to distinguish all possible variations. The author used to do it in three different ways. Firstly, he compared different contexts in which the role is performed, e.g. the university student as a person attending the regular lectures, a member of a circle of peers/friends, or a participant of a particular seminar (Znaniecki 1997).

Secondly, he compared the historical development of certain roles as well as their different duties in various periods (Znaniecki 1940). Thirdly, he made a distinction between different sizes of a role enactor's social circle, introducing a set of people mediating between the person and other members of the circle (Znaniecki 1965). This provided the grounds for developing the network theory.

Znaniecki's contribution corresponds with the methodological postulates of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (2009). An active selection of samples (in the case of the movie actor – particular enactments) and their comparison makes it possible to develop a (grounded) theory. The quality of this enterprise depends on triangulation (Konecki 2000; Denzin 2009). When one wants to focus on an individual actor, the situation can be considered theoretically futile, but the discovery of different contexts in which he/she acts provides data for comparisons. The introduction of the biographic perspective allows the researcher to distinguish both constant and variable elements of the role. A comparison of movie roles from an actor's different periods of life – along with a comparison of different frameworks constituting the reference for the role (the actor in his/her movie role, the actor as a member of a movie crew, or the actor as an idol for his/her fans) – opens up various possibilities for a successful development of the theory. Additionally, analyzing the actor's own remarks and that of other members of his/her various social circles enriches the analysis.

Finally, *with regard to the last question out of those introduced in the beginning of this article* – Howard S. Becker (2008) noticed that the creation of artwork involves more people than the artist himself/herself. A movie with its long list of credits is a particularly good example. The cinematographic work as a case for analyzing the role raises the possibility to study negotiations as the basis of the division of labor. Focusing on the actor's involvement results in defining his/her actual extent of agency in the creation of the final version of the movie, i.e. is how much his/her actual performance depends on his/her own ideas and skills, and how much of that has been accomplished owing to other people involved in the process. To what extent is it the director's vision of the role and how much of a say does the actor or actress have? The final result emerges from *fine-tuning* (Farrell 2001; cf. Schütz 2007), which is why the observation of the process can be a subject of the study. However, the introduction of the biographical analysis can lead to the discovery of trajectories – e.g. the actor's or actress' growing influence on different members of the staff (fellow actors, screenwriters, directors, etc.) – resulting from the experience and respect accumulated through the years of their work. A comparison of particular enactments (both movie roles and professional roles) offers insight into the networking aspect of the social role. This allows the researcher to study the person's impact in different contexts. The interesting topic would be how the rank of an actor acquired due to his/her well-evaluated enactments under particular conditions invokes positive reactions in others. A good performance in a movie becomes a value, a form of capital transferred between different social circles. It can help the actor to be cast in another work, negotiate contract details, and grow the social circles of his/her fans.

An analysis of the performance as a value is a good place to indicate the point in which actual actions are transformed into cultural objects. While the relationship between a movie role and a cultural text it is based upon (a script, a novel, a theatrical piece, etc.) seems to be clear, the process during which the

enactment becomes an element of the culture needs a more elaborate discussion. As Wendy Griswold (2013:11) defines it, a cultural object is a *shared significance embodied in form*. While a movie as a whole, complete piece might be perceived as such, its selected components (scenes, music scores, particular roles) also include such values. Certain movie figures carry meanings that are used to interpret everyday situations. Keanu Reeves' Neo from *Matrix* or Hugo Weaving's "V" from *V for Vendetta* were adopted as anti-system symbols, while Louise Fletcher's Nurse Ratched from *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* epitomizes the oppressive system. A particular enactment becomes a reference for aspiring young actors and actresses, a topic for scientific and critical debates and analyses, or an inspiration for fan cosplays. As such they become a cultural currency in the cinematographic social world, but also in other social worlds: fandoms constituted by popular culture enthusiasts. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1984; 1986) terminology, they become a form of cultural capital. They also might become boundary objects, as different evaluations of the role can be the basis for the emergence of arenas. It can be assumed that – similarly to the social world of theater – movie productions produce a number of contexts in which conflicts can arise (between the director and the actor, between different esthetics, recruitment, etc.) (Zimnica-Kuzioła 2018). Since the movie is a more democratic and accessible medium than theater, another arena for conflict can be identified: that between educated taste and popular taste. Performance can be evaluated differently by different parties, and accepting institutions as gatekeepers in defining certain pieces as legitimate works of art is outdated. Social worlds are 'reproduced' rather than 'exist', thus manifesting in discursive forms. The enactment as a cultural object is discussed by professional critics, but also by unprofessional ones.

Esthetic values applied by institutions are often not accepted by fandoms (Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002). A movie or a performance rejected as it is considered as 'unworthy' of being called true work of art by institutional judges can be accepted as such by fans. This is how some works gain the status of 'cult movies'.
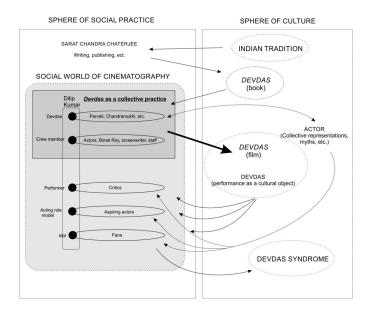
## Sharaf Rehman's study of Dilip Kumar as an example of the sociology of the artist

The discussion about the social role of the actor as both the performance and the cultural object might be the point of departure for further analysis of the social worlds of cinematography. Focusing on one movie actor can lead to the discovery of multiple roles, circles, networks, organizations, and institutions that are involved in his/her different social role enactments, as well as his/her influence on the rest of the system. While the social world does not emerge around a certain person but, rather, is organized around a certain social process (Fine 2004; Strauss 2008), the study of one's career can be a particularly good example of socialization to the social world and of activities leading to its change. As Sharaf Rehman writes, "the Indian cinema can be divided into before Dilip Kumar and after Dilip Kumar," which makes this actor's life and work a particularly interesting object of study in the sociology of the movie actor. However, not only the topic, but also Rehman's approach makes his paper a fine contribution to the field. While it remains close to the secondary biographical data on the author and media interviews with him – and does not strive to build theoretical generalizations – it still contains the elements specified above as proper components of the pragmatically-driven study of the artist.

Based on the actual record of Kumar's life, the author undertakes the analysis of the actor's career, underlining certain collective practices that Kumar was involved in. Rehman recalls Becker's approach to the art as a collective enterprise, but he puts the emphasis on the Indian artist's agency, i.e. the influence exerted on the developing artwork, but also his reflectivity on – and understanding of– the collective effort: "He realized that he needed to be more than merely an actor for hire. From that point forward, he accepted only one movie at a time and only if he could be a part of the entire creative process." It shows the perspective of a movie actor as a participant in a social world. However, there are also other cases located in the biographical chronology that allow one to make a comparison and build up a complete view of Kumar as a significant actor of the social world of Indian cinematography. Rehman introduces different frameworks and social circles which he was involved in during his work: as a dialog writer, as an actor, as a producer, as a collaborator for both crew members and technicians, and as an idol both for actors of a younger generation and for people who watched his films. Through the introduction of critics' voices, a place for a social arena is made, yet Rehman does not follow this way.

After providing this theoretical framework, Rehman does something that might be called the study of the social 'becoming', which is often the topic of research within the tradition of sociological pragmatism (Becker 2009; Byczkowska 2012; Konecki 2012; Porczyński 2013; Kacperczyk 2016). He undertakes the analysis of consecutive cases of "doing things together" on movies in which Kumar starred. It is a study of the development from an "accidental actor" to the status of "India's gift to humanity." Every movie cooperation impacts both culture and the social world of cinematography.

## Figure 1. Dilip Kumar in the social world of cinematography



*Source: Self-elaboration.*

The figure shows the conventional distinction between the spheres of social action and culture; they influence each other. Culture is reproduced by social practices, but also provides references and helps to organize them. As Znaniecki (1963) argues, symbols are transferred between different cultural systems through human action. Here, Dilip Kumar is the center of several social circles that emerge due to his work on the movie (*Devdas* as a collective practice) as well as the centers of the circles constructed in reference to a certain cultural object (the *Devdas* movie and Kumar's performance as Devdas). He plays the role of an actor, whose performance is evaluated by critics, a role model for colleagues in the field, and an idol for fans of his acting. Simultaneously, all these social circles can intertwine and overlap.

Sarat Chandra Chatterjee wrote the book title *Devdas* as a critique of traditions existing in the Indian society, particularly the *varna* system. As such, it be-

came the inspiration for the movies (other than earlier *Devdas* movies). The social system is represented by the characters, their relationships, and experiences. They are recreated by actors' performances; in this case, we are not interested in Kumar himself, but, rather, in Devdas and his actions.

However, in the case of cinema, 'being' the character is not enough. It is also important 'how well' the actor 'is' the protagonist. For a sociologist of the movie, studying meanings embedded in a picture would probably be sufficient, but to make such an analysis in the context of the sociology of art, the esthetic component needs to be discussed (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2020). With this into consideration, culture provides many symbolic resources. Among them are the cultural representations and myths relating to the role of the actor; they also include the acknowledged esthetic components of acting. They are references for the actual actor and for other crew members' work on the picture. The final effect of their work is the movie (with all its components), here understood as a cultural object. The actual performance can also influence the ideas about how a good actor should perform (see the bidirectional arrow in Figure 1). Here, Kumar is a member of the staff, working on the final product. The actor's status and the extent of his agency form the basis for evaluations of his former collaborations (e.g. on *Daag*), but they are also negotiated during the whole process of working on the picture.

A movie and an actor's performance both become cultural objects which are evaluated by the participants of the social world of cinematography. Critics make an assessment using their knowledge and convictions (based on cultural representations) about how a good actor should enact a movie role. The result of their evaluation influences the status of the actor in the social world. The performance is also evaluated by other actors (including members of the younger generation, such as Shah Rukh Khan) as well as by the movie audience, whose members can become fans. Their appreciation also impacts the meaning of the actor in the whole field. Due to the importance of the topic and the success of the picture, the issue of *Devdas* also becomes a reference for real-life situations similar to the cases of the characters such as Baron Munchausen, Faust, or Werther (Griswold 2013).

This is how the evaluation of the role performance influences not only the status of a person in a particular social circle, but also in others. In this paper, I have described only one instance. To make the study of Dilip Kumar a complete case of the sociology of the artist, the analysis must include comparisons of successive collaborative enterprises building up his career. It is due to the fact the final assessment of the particular performance makes an impact also on different cases of participation in a movie as well as performances evaluated as social objects. By analyzing the problem in chronological order, a sociologist can indicate, e.g., the improving status of the actor in the social world, or his/her 'ups and downs'. Although in the case of Kumar, his importance was increasing through his career (when comparing his enactments from different periods), he is more accepted as the actor who played Devdas, or Shankar from *Daag*– than as the actor who played Jagdish from *Jwar Bhata*.

## Conclusion

Although a meticulous approach to the sociology of the movie actor represented by Sharaf Rehman's study of Dilip Kumar does not allow one to build up generalizations about actors and actress-

es as a social category, it is far from simplifications forced by the specifics of statistical procedures. Supporting the study with tools described in this afterword makes it possible to take a step toward a more elaborate social theory. The application of several mutually-supportive perspectives (role theory, biographical perspective) to historically accurate events forming Kumar's life trajectory allows one to conceive of a complex and multidimensional space (a social world) shaped by practices, negotiations, social circles, institutions, and values, all of which somehow define the actor's status and which the individual modifies due to his/her agency.

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## Citation