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Brando's Engaging Contradictions

Abstract

This article belongs to the continuing work on the labor and craft of screen performance, feminist scholarship that recognizes women's overlooked contributions, and cultural-materialist research that examines film practice in relation to its historical context. It deconstructs the Cold War and Hollywood-friendly idea that Marlon Brando was a Method actor by untangling the term's multiple meanings, contextualizing the factors that gave rise to Brando's association with Method acting, and highlighting the ignored evidence that he studied with Modern acting teacher Stella Adler. The article details contrasts between the Method's Freudian focus on actors' inhibitions and the holistic, research-intensive Modern acting principles Brando employed. It clarifies that Strasberg's Method was designed to make actors' more responsive to (male) directors, whereas Modern acting strategies foster actors' agency and collaborative abilities. The article explores connections between Modern actors' in-depth exploration of characters' social realities, Brando's interest in films with diverse casts and progressive politics, and his offscreen work to support social justice initiatives. It highlights his involvement in One-Eyed Jacks *(1961),* Burn! *(1966), and other films that align audience identification with the autonomous nonwhite characters. The discussion also outlines Brando's participation in political actions integral to the rise of the American Indian Movement in the 1960s, the work of Martin Luther King Jr., and the Black Panthers. It proposes that contradictions between well-publicized aspects of Brando's star career and the mundane dimensions of his work as an actor and citizen reveal new insights into American acting, Hollywood cinema, and mid-twentieth century America.*

Marlon Brando's two Academy Awards and eight Oscar nominations for Best Actor place him in the rarefied company of acclaimed studio-era stars Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Bette Davis, and Ingrid Bergman. Yet his career also reflects the unique dynamics of the late studio era, when the producer-unit system, overseen by executives and studio producers, gave way to package productions involving studio contracts with "independent producers who put each individual film together by assembling financing, key above-the-line talent, and other members of the freelance team" (D. Mann 67). During this transitional period, the studios still dominated production, distribution, and publicity, but stars of the 1950s, who include Marlon Brando, Marilyn Monroe, James Stewart, Elizabeth Taylor, John Wayne, and Aubrey Hepburn, were independent agents and individual brands rather than studio-affiliated contract players. As brands, these stars sometimes reflected the polarized 1950s, with nonconformist Marlon Brando often representing rebellion against corporate and Cold War dictates to conform (Palmer 1–17).

Brando's commercial and critical success in the 1950s suggests that his early screen performances held special relevance for the era. His portrayal in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1951) led to his first Oscar nomination. The next year, he garnered wider acclaim: for *Viva Zapata!* (Elia Kazan, 1952), he received an Academy Award nomination and was named Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival and Best Foreign Actor by the British Academy. The following year, *Julius Caesar* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1953) led to another Oscar nomination and another Best Foreign Actor Award from the British Academy. The next year, Brando won the Academy Award for his performance in *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954). In subsequent award seasons, he was named World Film Favorite–Male at the 1956 Golden Globe Awards, garnered an Oscar nomination for *Sayo-*

nara (Joshua Logan, 1957), received a Best Foreign Actor nomination from the British Academy for *The Young Lions* (Edward Dmytryk, 1958), and was named Top Male Star at Motion Picture Exhibitor magazine's 1959 Laurel Awards.[1]

Brando's onscreen embodiment of a complex 1950s masculinity with conflicting qualities and associations is likely the most discussed contradiction in the star's image (W. Mann). As observers consistently note, his performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and several other 1950s films gave vivid expression to a "mean-but-vulnerable masculinity" (Dyer 12–13). Describing Brando as a "cauldron of paradoxes and contradictions," Molly Haskell finds that he was "vulnerable and intense, yet impossibly virile." Amplifying her observations about Brando's ambiguous masculinity, Haskell explains: with his "high voice and studly physique, he was all male, yet whimperingly feminine [and in] the meteoric incandescence of his beautiful youth, these qualities were in exquisite equipoise."

Analyzing Brando's contradictory, even androgynous masculinity in *On the Waterfront*, James Naremore highlights the "Olivier-like delicacy in the movement of his hands that makes an effective contrast with his weightlifter's torso and his Roman head" (194). Brando's portrayal in *Viva Zapata!* features a similar sustained contrast, despite changes in his physical choices that illustrate Emiliano Zapata's journey from farmer to community leader, disenchanted political insider, and ill-fated ethical outsider. Throughout that evolution, contrasting qualities in Brando's performance convey Zapata's undefined masculinity, intense freedom of thought, and attunement to the land. Notably, his solemn, almost weighted countenance is a marked counterpoint to his light, fluid movement, as when he essentially glides across spaces in the character's form-fitting pants and bolero jacket that reveal the actor's supple physique and modern dance training.[2]

The "sullen, neurotic individualism dovetailing with antiestablishment 'sincerity'" in Brando's signature roles warrant continued analysis, especially because they "set the tone for a new kind of male star and movie scenario in which women were rendered marginal, scorned, degraded and ignored" (Haskell).[3] Moreover, Brando's career features incongruities beyond the fraught masculinity he portrayed. The discussion that follows explores three intertwined, often overlooked contradictions. First, for many observers, Brando remains the quintessential Method actor, even though he was not a Method actor who used personal experiences to generate emotion; instead, he was someone who employed a *Modern acting* approach, in which actors use script analysis and research to imaginatively enter their characters' social and psychological worlds (Rosenstein et al.; Dillon; Ochoa). Second, some of Brando's early screen performances exemplify the Method acting style associated with young or working-class male protagonists, whose verbal inarticulateness and physical expressiveness captured a nonconformist "stylistic or ideological leaning within fifties' culture" (Naremore 200). Yet Brando, the icon of the new "American" acting style (Vineberg), used his ability to combine expressivity and inarticulateness to create characterizations that challenged American machismo and exceptionalism in Hollywood films as different as *The Ugly American* (George Englund, 1963) and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (John Huston, 1967). Third, Brando's early critical and commercial success made him a member of the Hollywood elite, but his offscreen political activities, which included support for the Black Panthers, put him at odds with executives, exhibitors, and film critics attuned to the demands of mainstream (white) audiences.

In Brando's career, the three contradictions intersect: the Modern acting approach, which heightened his attention to characters' cultural realities, fostered the social awareness that led to his activism and interest in films like *The Appaloosa* (Sidney J. Furie, 1966); in this "Western," a modest Latino homestead is the platonic haven to which Brando, the white cowboy who had been adopted by the family as a youth, happily returns at the close of the story. Like the labour involved in Modern acting, Brando's participation in socially conscious films and offscreen social justice work fails to match the mystique surrounding daring acting methods, alluring characters, and offscreen misadventures. As a result, the vision of Brando as a Method actor, fifties' sex symbol, and eccentric recluse dominates discussions. This trend in film criticism creates ample room for inquiries into the unglamorous contradictions in Brando's star career.

Sorting Out Method Acting's Myriad Meanings

Brando's assumed affiliation with "Method acting" emerges from the term's ambiguity and association with admired performance. For example, physical transformations have become signs of professionalism. So, Robert De Niro, who gained weight for *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), and Michael Fassbender, who lost weight to portray Bobby Sands in *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), get categorized as Method actors. Performers who stay in character seem to demonstrate actorly commitment. Thus, critics blithely identify Daniel Day-Lewis, Denzel Washington, and Jared Leto as

Method actors.

Acting teacher Lee Strasberg publicized a direct connection between his Method and the new "American" acting style popular in the 1950s. Since then, some people have seen "Method acting" as a catchall term for extreme preparation techniques *and* intense male performances. Despite variations in the term's use, one detail remains constant: commentators identify male actors' physical alterations, zealous offscreen work, and highly expressive performances as examples of Method acting, but they rarely discuss women and the Method. Feminist theatre scholars have long called attention to the sexism underlying Method training and discourse. Rosemary Malague, Sharrell D. Luckett, and other scholar-practitioners illustrate the need to contextualize and look beyond patriarchal, Euro-American acting methods and acting styles.

Patriarchy's focus on men's labor has made Lee Strasberg, Harold Clurman, and Elia Kazan the central figures in accounts of mid-twentieth century American acting. However, it was Brando's training with Stella Adler and Montgomery Clift's collaborations with Mira Rostova that created the new "American" style of acting. Moreover, a gender-based, multi-decade war in the acting-directing profession has obscured the acting principles that define the Method. The key opponents in this war had their first major battle in 1934. Group Theater actors had been questioning Strasberg's approach to actor training and script analysis. Frustrated that Strasberg claimed Stanislavsky as his authority, Stella Adler took time to study directly with Stanislavsky. She then shared Stanislavsky's actual views on training and directing actors with Group Theater colleagues. In response, Strasberg defiantly conceded that he taught "the Strasberg Method, not Stanislavsky's System" (Lewis 71; Chinoy 95–112). He then spent his career promoting his Method as superior to *and* authorized by Stanislavsky's ideas. Adler and subsequent scholars have spent their careers untangling Strasberg's Method and Stanislavsky's System.

Whereas Stanislavsky and Modern acting teachers seek to facilitate actors' ability to delve into and convey the rich inner lives of fictional characters, Strasberg focuses on "the peculiar, divided, dual quality of modern man" (Strasberg 20). The Stanislavsky System and Modern acting techniques give actors a toolkit of strategies for creating characterizations and performances, while Strasberg's Method offers exercises to "unblock areas of the individual that may be locked or inhibited" (Strasberg 138). Circulating Stanislavsky's ideas, Modern acting teachers like Adler emphasize script analysis. As illustrated in the notebooks her student Marlon Brando prepared for every production, this requires actors to explore and identify (a) characters' given circumstances, (b) scene-by-scene problems that characters strive to solve, (c) characters' actions to solve problems, and (d) moments when characters switch from one action to another.

Following Stanislavsky, Modern acting proponents study characters' given circumstances and actions to develop performances. By comparison, Strasberg argues that actors can use anything, including substitutions unrelated to the script, to motivate them to do what their character "comes on stage to achieve" (Strasberg 78). He values the "storehouse of an actor's memory" and explains that locating ways for actors to find, capture, and relive bits of emotional memory is "the task [he] was to devote [himself] to in establishing the Method" (Strasberg 60). Exercises to recreate or relive "an intense emotional experience at will" are the core of his Method (Strasberg 114). In his view, these exercises are the *only* training that leads actors to "reveal the idea of the play" (Strasberg 173). For Strasberg, tapping into private, often traumatic experiences, is the *only* way to trigger "real" emotion in performance. Importantly, Stanislavsky had explored this approach years earlier, but he rejected it because it was unreliable and damaged actors' mental health.

Strasberg's emphasis on mining psychological traumas constitutes a profound split with Stanislavsky's view of the actor as a creative artist who builds characterizations and executes performances by focusing on the "facts" of the fictional world (Carnicke 203). Strasberg sees actors through a Freudian lens, but Stanislavsky and Modern actors envision a holistic self, which is responsive to nonthreatening activities that (a) sharpen concentration, attention, and observation and (b) develop an actor's imagination and ability to create a bond with characters' circumstances and challenges. Script analysis leads actors to "put themselves in their characters' shoes [and fosters] concentration on the events of the [fiction] during performance" (Carnicke 133). Similarly, "continual exposure to literature, art, people, cultures, and history" enhances actors' imagination and ability to understand and embody characters' given circumstances, problems, and actions (Carnicke 153, 152). This emphasis on study that directs actors' attention outward contrasts sharply with Strasberg's Freudian focus on eliminating personal inhibitions. Moreover, whereas Strasberg's Method trains actors to be responsive to directors and teachers, Stanislavsky and Modern acting teachers facilitate actors' work as "independent artists," free from "dependence on directors (and teachers)" (Malague 75). Brando's renown as a headstrong

actor is telling evidence of the Modern acting training that prepared to him be independent.

Modern acting techniques address the *acting problems* of building characterizations and developing the concentration and physical ability to embody those characterizations. As such, they contrast with the Method's emphasis on "the actor's problem" of experiencing real feeling during performance (Strasberg 85). As Brando's production notebooks show, Modern acting labour includes voice and body work, observation and life study, script analysis, and pantomime sense-memory improvisations to develop attention to environments and raise awareness of how thought, feeling, and intention colour movement. This approach contrasts with Strasberg's view that sense memories are primarily useful for accessing and retrieving personal experiences.

Modern acting and the Method represent different paths to "truthful" emotion in performance. For Modern actors, it emerges from their embodiment of characters' actions. Strasberg thinks it results from actors reliving personal experiences. Modern acting principles foster performers' ability to "think and behave as their characters would logically do in the circumstances" of the story. Strasberg wants actors to create "an inner life" unrelated to the fiction that prompts the behavior "needed by the scene or requested by the director" (Carnicke 204). Strasberg's idea that acting requires use of personal experiences leads him to see non-Method actors as never doing the real work of acting (Strasberg 5). He insinuates that non-Method actors do little more than deliver lines and manage props. However, the published and archival documents of Adler, Brando, Josephine Dillon, Sophie Rosenstein, and the Actors' Laboratory in Hollywood show that Modern actors do much more than memorize lines.

Strasberg expanded his attacks on Adler and other professionals who embraced Stanislavsky's holistic view of acting, charging that they dealt only with "the rhetorical and external nature of acting" while his Method alone created "truthfulness of experience and of expression" (Strasberg 30). Further, he contrasted the "American" style of allegedly Method actors with what he described as the artificial, conventional, and commercial nature of British and Anglo-American acting. Elia Kazan, co-founder of the Actors Studio in New York, took up the attack on Anglo-American acting styles after (long unemployed) Strasberg became the Studio's artistic director. Kazan praised "American" acting for being intense, spontaneous, and filled with defiant (male) emotionality. He identified the Moscow Art Theatre as his primary influence, arguing that Americans did not have "the burden that everyone should be noble or behave heroically, that the English used to have'" (qtd in Vineberg 113). Positioning Method acting as "American" stymied the anticommunists who had laid siege to the liberal performing arts community. Disparaging Anglo actors made Kazan's references to the Moscow Art Theatre a sign of patriotism rather than communism. Importantly, Strasberg and Kazan's calculated attacks on Anglo acting muddled ideas about Method acting: the rhetoric conflated Strasberg's Method, which broke down inhibitions and made actors responsive to directors, with the intensity of the "American" acting style ushered in by Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift.

Disentangling Brando from Myths about Method Acting

Brando's reputation as one of the twentieth century's greatest actors rested on his seemingly fearless portrayals, which were more expressive than theatrical and cinematic norms and, at the same time, suggested that words often fail to communicate thoughts and feelings. Reflecting on Brando's work as an actor, Naremore observes, "Among the 'rebel' stars of his day Brando always seemed the most gifted and intelligent, the least inclined to romantic excess" (195–196). Yet, as he points out, Brando's performances do not reveal a Method approach. Instead, the star's ability to communicate "subtext was not new in Hollywood performances, [because] every form of realist acting ... encourages the use of expressive objects" (194). Naremore highlights that "Brando himself has disclaimed any significant influence" from the Actors Studio in New York (197; see 198; see Ochoa 215).

Brando is not the only actor mistakenly associated with the Actors Studio and Strasberg's Method. Montgomery Clift's portrayals in *The Search* (Fred Zinnemann, 1948), *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), and *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953) are seen as Method performances (Vineberg 142–154). However, Clift was openly opposed to Strasberg's Method, arguing that Strasberg's actors "never created characters [and] instead merely played variations of themselves" (Bosworth 133). Even though some observers see Clift as "the first member of the Actors Studio generation to become a movie star" (Vineberg 143), from 1939 to 1941 he apprenticed with Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, respected stage actors maligned by Strasberg. Clift's supposedly Method performances also reflect his collaborations with Mira Rostova from 1942 through the early 1950s (Baron 74–76). Their behind-the-scenes work on *The Search* led to "a new kind of acting—almost docu

mentary in approach" (Bosworth 138).

As with Clift, Brando's memorable performances in the 1947–1949 stage production and 1951 film titled *A Streetcar Named Desire* were thought to exemplify Method acting. As David Garfield notes, "the prime symbol of the [Actors] Studio actor was always to be the torn T-shirt and its prototype, Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski" (151). Hal Hinson observes, "For most, the Method begins and ends with Brando. He and the Method are synonymous to the extent that his style has become the Method style" (200). While Brando's performance as Kowalski initiated and defined "an entire *style* of acting," Brando's approach to acting was not shaped by Strasberg or Kazan, but instead by Stella Adler (Malague 58; see Balcerzak). His scripts and research materials made available after his death in 2004 reveal that his stage and screen performances were grounded in extensive individual script analysis and preparation. Brando "read books about the world of his characters, wrote pages of notes highlighting questions and problems," and drafted revised scenes and dialogue sequences for each of his characters (Mizuchi xxiii).

Brando studied with Adler, enrolling in her workshops "at the New School for Social Research in the fall of 1943" (Mizruchi 32). Revealing his interest in Modern acting work that gently encourages development of a flexible and expressive body, Brando also studied with Katherine Dunham, the renowned modern dancer, choreographer, and social activist. Embracing Modern acting's view that building characterizations includes attention to physical details, Brando took makeup classes at the New School and then began to incorporate appearance-altering makeup into many of his characterizations. In 1944 and 1945, Brando spent considerable time as a guest of Adler and Harold Clurman. As Susan Mizruchi notes, "the New School atmosphere [of artistic freedom and attention to craft] was reinforced at the home of Adler and Clurman (now married), whose apartment on West Fifty-Fourth Street was a gathering place for the Adler acting clan" (48). Stage performances that established Brando as a serious actor include *Truckline Café* (1946), directed by Clurman, and *A Flag Is Born* (1946), directed by Luther Adler, Stella's brother.

Throughout his career, Brando identified Stella Adler as his formative acting teacher. In his foreword to Adler's manual, *The Technique of Acting* (1988), Brando explains that her Modern acting approach does not lend itself "to vulgar exploitations, as some other well-known so-called methods have done" (1). In *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, he states that, in contrast to the Stanislavsky-based approach Adler taught, "'Method Acting' was a term popularized, bastardized and misused by Lee Strasberg" (81). Despite all this, Brando's 1950s performances are still seen as emerging from Strasberg's Method. Gender-based perceptions frame Brando's portrayals in *A Streetcar Named Desire, The Wild One* (László Benedek, 1953), and *On the Waterfront* as Method-inspired, even though the gestures, postures, and vocal choices he used to portray his characters in these films depended on his Modern acting training with Alder.

Naremore explains that Brando's performance in *On the Waterfront* is "so technically adept and intense that it energized the film and affected whole generations of actors" (205). Through his ability to depict a "tough but confused and sensitive male who wins his way to adulthood … in an indifferent society, [Brando became] one of those actors who represents a type so forcefully that it becomes a persistent feature of the culture" (Naremore 205). It has been assumed that Brando created the performance by substituting experiences from his personal life. However, the actor's papers and public statements, together with information about the acting methods Brando developed through his work with Adler, clarify that his characterizations in *On the Waterfront* and other films began with research into characters' social circumstances and emerged from crafted, rehearsed choices about vocal and physical expression.

Strasberg argued that his Method fostered "truthfulness of experience and of expression" that contrasted with an old-fashioned emphasis on "the rhetorical and external nature of acting" (30). Brando's performances, however, show that compelling emotional expression can emerge from the sympathetic knowledge of characters that actors develop during script analysis and cultural, historical, and socioeconomic research. As Modern acting teacher Josephine Dillon explains, actors' intensive study is the basis for lifelike portrayals that arise from the "mental pictures" and "mental conversations" actors generate as they build characterizations (9). Stella Adler also saw life study, historical research, and script analysis as actors' best tools for creating characters distinct from themselves. In her view, spontaneous, lifelike, authentic performances occur when actors concentrate on their characters' circumstances, beliefs, and experiences. Moreover, Adler's "emphasis on the 'given circumstances' pushes actors to analyze the social, political, and economic environments that produce different kinds of 'characters'" (Malague 27). If Brando had been a Method actor focused on retrieving and reliving personal experiences, the preoccupation with breaking down psychological inhibitions might

have carried over into other aspects of his career. Instead, his training with the "eclectic, politically committed Stella Adler" (Naremore 198; see Ochoa 186) focused his attention on social and material realities. That focus fostered Brando's participation in socially relevant films and offscreen political activism.

Modern Acting Approach Accords with Brando's Political Films and Activism Offscreen

Brando's activism began in the 1940s. His vision of the actor as an engaged artist-citizen reflects the sentiments of the Group Theater expatriates who established the Actors' Laboratory in Hollywood in 1941. These seasoned character actors, who include Phoebe Brand, Morris Carnovsky, Roman Bohnen, and J. Edward Bromberg, "rejected the image of the actor as a colorful figure 'inhabiting an ivory tower above the petty affairs of daily life'" (Baron 195). A longtime sceptic of Hollywood, Brando recognized that stars "are made for profit" and used to sell films, "newspapers and magazines … toiletries, fashion, cars and almost anything else" (Dyer 5). However, he came to see that films and media events could be used to sell something other than commodities, serving instead to raise awareness of social inequities. In the 1950s and 1960s especially, Brando mobilized his fame to highlight injustices and foster support for efforts to dismantle racist and imperialist policies and practices.

Long before Brando, studio-era stars tacitly or directly promoted lifestyles, consumer products, and social identities (Gledhill xiii–xx). Yet they also lent their time and prominence to social causes, most visibly in work to support American involvement in World War II (Blauvelt). Brando shared their interest in doing film work on behalf of service personnel. Thus, after rejecting many Hollywood offers, he agreed to appear in *The Men* (Fred Zinnemann, 1950), a film about the plight of disabled World War II veterans. The production presents the servicemen in a sympathetic light, but it rejects jingoistic celebrations of military adventure to illuminate the irreparable physical and emotional cost of combat. Its candid viewpoint aligns with Brando's earlier participation in the stage productions of Maxwell Anderson's *Truckline Café*, about the damage war inflicts on relationships, and Ben Hecht's *A Flag is Born,* which advocates for a Jewish homeland after the Holocaust.

Brando saw *The Men* as an opportunity to appear in a socially conscious production, whereas Hollywood cast Broadway's hottest star to attract audiences to a risky commercial venture. Brando's first film thus foreshadows ongoing, career-defining tensions between his interest in progressive narratives and studios' focus on conventional entertainment. For example, Brando elected to portray Zapata because the historical figure had led land-reform efforts, but 20th Century Fox minimized the narrative's socialist message, instead promoting *Viva Zapata!* as an adventure movie featuring a sexually alluring star. *The Men* also prefigures Brando's more overt use of his star status to facilitate the financing and distribution of independent productions such as *Burn!* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1969), about a slave rebellion against commercial-imperialist control in the Caribbean, and *A Dry White Season* (Euzhan Palcy, 1989), about human rights abuses in apartheid-era South Africa.

Brando's interest in promoting progressive social values is especially visible in his directorial debut, *One-Eyed Jacks*, which was shot in 1959 and eventually released in 1961. Produced by Brando's Pennebaker Productions, the multiyear endeavor led to an unusual "Western" in which Latina women are central. Set in 1880s Sonora, Mexico, and Monterey, California, the film presents a world populated by Spanish-speaking and English-speaking characters whose daily interactions are sometimes marred by white racism. In those instances, Brando's flawed but eventually altruistic character challenges the racists who denigrate Latinx people. The film is notable for the screen time and in-depth characterizations of the two Mexican actresses: Pina Pellicer plays the young woman, who sagaciously navigates Rio's conflicting agendas, and award-winning star Katy Jurado portrays her mother, who uses intelligence, compassion, and diplomacy to protect herself and her daughter in a precarious environment.

Figure 1. In One-Eyed Jacks *(1961), Brando and co-star Pina Pellicer exist in an unsegregated social world.*

In 1959, when *One-Eyed Jacks* was in development, Brando worked with African American actors Harry Belafonte and Ossie Davis to establish the Hollywood chapter of SANE (National Committee for a Sane Nu-

clear Policy). Throughout the 1960s, Brando was active in the civil rights movement, contributing money to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and to a scholarship for the children of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers. He participated in freedom rides to desegregate interstate buses and joined the 1963 March on Washington. In 1964, he participated in protests organized by the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC). The civil disobedience actions took the form of "fish-ins," which publicized tribal people violating fishing-season regulations to assert Indigenous rights ratified in treaties between tribal nations and the US government. The Washington state fish-ins attracted Indigenous people from across the United States and Canada. They sparked the Red Power Movement and "paved the way for future intertribal activist endeavors," which include the 1969–1971 occupation of Alcatraz Island by the Indians of All Tribes group and the 1972 occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs building in Washington, DC, by members of the American Indian Movement (Shreve 406).

Brando had attended the NIYC's 1963 annual meeting in Utah and "brought a film crew along to record the proceedings" (Shreve 418). Members of the youth council subsequently "contacted Brando about the fish-in, believing his presence would attract greater media attention to their cause and aid in the larger goal of sustaining treaty rights" (Shreve 418). As part of the protest, Brando, Episcopal minister John Yaryan, and Puyallup tribal leader Bob Satiacum fished in Washington state's Puyallup River without permits. They were arrested, and soon news of the fish-ins and Brando's arrest "splashed across the front pages of the state's newspapers and even flowed through national news wires" (Shreve 420). Some Indigenous activists saw Brando's participation as "detrimental" (Shreve 418), because he initially did not understand that African American and Native Americans had different agendas: "Instead of integration into American society, [Native American activists] sought to preserve Native culture; rather than focus on social equality, they wanted tribal communities to remain sovereign and self-governing; and instead of devoting their time and resources to gain voting rights, they [emphasized] upholding treaty rights" (Shreve 405). Later, "the NIYC did work closely with leaders of the African American Civil Rights Movement, most notably in 1968 when Hank Adams, Mel Thom, and others joined Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign" (Shreve 419).

In 1968, Brando's political activities included continued financial support for the Black Panthers and his participation in the memorial for Panther leader Bobby Hutton. Throughout the decade, he walked away from stardom, making himself unavailable or ill-suited for roles in *The Arrangement* (Elia Kazan, 1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), and *Ryan's Daughter* (David Lean, 1970). He chose instead to focus on *The Ugly American, The Appaloosa, Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and *Burn!*, films that exposed mainstream audiences to diverse casts, queer sexuality, and the toxic legacy of Anglo-European imperialism.[1]

Figure 2. Queimada*, also known as* Burn! *(1969), gave Brando the chance to make an anti-imperialist film with director Gillo Pontecorvo, known for* The Battle of Algiers *(1966).*

Like studio-era stars whose Hollywood battles merged with their onscreen roles, Brando became associated with the rebellious characters he portrayed in films like *The Wild One*. In addition, like complex figures such as Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson, and Judy Garland, Brando revolted against the Hollywood system that made him a star (Dyer 6). Recognizing his especially privileged status as a white male sex symbol, Brando used his fame to publicize injustices against marginalized people and to secure funding for films with more diverse casts. Brando also directed attention to social justice initiatives in the rare interviews he granted. Following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Brando appeared on Johnny Carson's late-night talk show to ask white Americans to recognize their implicit biases and to contribute one percent of their annual income to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.[2] He also appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1973 after the four-month siege at Wounded Knee, in which armed government forces surrounded protesting American Indian Movement members. During the interview, Brando explained how stereotypes in Hollywood movies had harmed all people of colour and contributed especially to the misconceptions about Indigenous people. He also ensured that tribal leaders

illustrated successful tribal-led economic projects and clarified the negative effects that mining and other outside ventures have on tribal land.

Thus, Brando, a Hollywood star *and* an actor trained to prioritize social realities, used his fame to challenge dominant socioeconomic forces. His public support of Indigenous sovereignty, Black power, and African American civil rights reveal his conscious decision to mobilize his star power to benefit marginalized people. His many films that antagonized powerful constituencies ranging from studio executives to movie theatre owners reflect his deliberate efforts to highlight historical wrongs and lend visibility to contemporary figures seeking social justice.

Brando's Contradictions from a Twenty-First Century Perspective

Brando's use of Modern acting principles fostered his profit-enhancing performances, progressive film choices, and offscreen work for social justice. His decision to decline the Best Actor Oscar for *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) secured his reputation as an outsider "contemptuous of celebrity and increasingly guilty about acting" (Naremore 196). The move might seem like a childish, attention-seeking act of rebellion. Yet, it was an extension of his work on behalf of Indigenous sovereignty and a pragmatic choice that largely echoed George C. Scott's decision to decline the Best Actor Oscar for Patton (Franklin Schaffner, 1970) due to his opposition to the Academy Awards ceremony.

Similarly, Brando's huge salary demands to appear in *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) seem like bizarre, egotistical star behavior. However, they involve conscious political theatre designed to make studios pay for their focus on profits rather than equity onscreen and off. Over the course of his career, Brando's wavering status as favored son and disparaged pariah has led some critics to see an eccentric rather than committed actor, a charismatic youth turned corpulent recluse.[1] Perhaps reflecting observers' schadenfreude, he is seen as a great twentieth-century actor, but the acclaim now mixes with amusing memes.[2] Two events in 2022 illustrate Brando's contradictory legacy.

During the tabloid-fodder hearings in Johnny Depp's defamation case against his ex-wife Amber Heard, who had accused Depp of physical and sexual abuse, Depp's attorney made a strategic reference to Brando. An expert witness for Heard had intimated that Depp's on-set use of earpieces "could be a sign of declining health due to his use of alcohol and substance abuse" (Nambiar). So, in cross examination, Depp's attorney challenged the inference, asking the witness if he knew whether Brando used earpieces during productions. The question caused the witness to backtrack, but the exchange revived stories of the lazy, arrogant star, who used cue cards on various productions and had someone feed newly revised lines to him through an earpiece during the chaotic production of *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (John Frankenheimer, 1966).

In contrast, Brando's laudable activism was a discrete footnote to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences event honoring Sacheen Littlefeather. To emphasize the plight of American Indian Movement members under military siege in the South Dakota town of Wounded Knee (Treuer 314–330), Brando had asked her to appear in his stead at the 1973 Oscar ceremony to decline his award for *The Godfather*. He wanted Littlefeather to read his statement condemning the US military action and Hollywood's misrepresentation of Indigenous people. The Academy denied the request prior to the telecast, members booed during her summary of Brando's remarks, and industry gatekeepers disparaged her character and denied her employment in the years following the telecast. The 2022 event included a formal apology to Littlefeather for Academy members' bigoted behaviour during and after the 1973 debacle. The Academy's "evening of reflection" noted her resilience in the face of sustained harassment and tacitly acknowledged the distance between the Academy's newfound commitment to Indigenous people and Brando's social justice efforts a half century earlier (Sun).

Whether seen as an agent of progressive social change or a cautionary tale about bad behavior and mental decline, Brando is part of contemporary popular culture, despite his passing in 2004 at the age of eighty. He continues to be known as Brando, his last name alone identifying the Hollywood icon known for his utilized or squandered abilities and his 1950s performances that gave visibility to a complex or incoherent white male identity in the postwar and Cold War era. An exemplar of the new "American" (Method) acting style, Brando has continued relevance to histories of performance, in part because contemporary research reveals that his performances were grounded in the Modern acting principles articulated by overlooked female acting teachers. The research also finally separates Strasberg's Method from the "American" acting style ushered in most notably by Brando's portrayal of working-class character Stanley Kowalski.

Brando's familiar image reflects the mystique surrounding certain 1950s stars, who had considerable power as studios transitioned into distribution entities

protected from the risks of production and exhibition. Stars remained key to marketing campaigns and, as Brando's career reveals, they secured additional influence as directors and independent producers. Strasberg's Method, which made acting mysterious, and the new "American" (Method) style of acting, which suited Cold War psychological dramas, supported Hollywood's focus on entertainment. By comparison, the cultural study central to Brando's Modern acting training fostered his support for social justice onscreen and off. In addition, his noncommercial film choices, social activism, and brinksmanship in negotiations with studio executives anticipate the counterculture independence associated with the Hollywood Renaissance (late 1960s/early 1970s). However, the prevailing disinterest in Brando's work beyond canonical, commercial hits like *A Streetcar Named Desire, On the Waterfront,* and *The Godfather* suggests that contemporary views of his career have been influenced by the corporate ethos that returned in the New Hollywood era (mid to late 1970s). Still, his prosaic contradictions—a Modern actor who was seen as a Method star, an anti-imperialist who was famous for his muscular "American" acting, and a social justice advocate whose influence arose from commercial media—are engaging because they shed light on histories of acting, cinema, and cultural dynamics in the United States.

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End Notes

1. Brando also received Best Actor Oscar nominations for *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972), and *A Dry White Season* (Euzhan Palcy, 1989).
2. Brando portrays characters of color in *Viva Zapata!* and *Teahouse of the August Moon* (Daniel Mann, 1956). Discussions surrounding *Viva Zapata!* focused on Cold War politics rather than Brando's casting (Schoenwald); today, observers list *Viva Zapata!* as one of many instances of brownface in Hollywood cinema, a pattern neatly summarized by Zach Vasquez. Casting in *Teahouse of the August Moon* followed the stage production, in which white actor David Wayne played the Japanese interpreter, a role that led to a Tony Award for Best Actor. The film was a commercial and critical success, receiving a Golden Globe Award for Motion Picture Promoting International Understanding. However, Brando's yellowface portrayal and the film's stereotypical depictions of Asian women have been criticized since the 1980s.
3. Haskell rightly identifies the misogyny that permeates Brando's films and those of other actors. The sexual abuse Maria Schneider experienced during the production of *Last Tango in Paris* (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972) is an example of Brando's complicity in the normalized misogyny that continues into today's #MeToo era.
4. Brando declined the role in *The Arrangement* because he had committed to activism following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Producer Daryl F. Zanuck wanted Brando to be cast in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, but Brando's support of the Black Panthers made him untenable in the view of 20th Century Fox executives (Meenan). Brando had been cast in *Ryan's Daughter,* but production delays on *Burn!* led him to withdraw from the project.
5. See "Marlon Brando Interview on *The Tonight Show* Starring Johnny Carson (May 11, 1968)."
6. See "Marlon Brando Interview on *The Dick Cavett Show* (June 12, 1973)." The tribal leaders on the show are Sam Cagey, Lummi Indian Tribal Chairman, Dennis Limberhand of the Northern Cheyanne Tribal Council, and Mervin Wright of the Pyramid Lake Piute Council. They are joined by Dr. Wallace Heath, Project Director for the Lummi People.
7. In 1936, Dudley Nichols declined the Best Writing, Screenplay Award for *The Informer* (John Ford, 1935) due to labor disputes between the studios and the Screen Writers Guild; Nichols accepted the Oscar at the 1938 awards ceremony.
8. Narratives about Brando's physical and mental decline after his early sexualized roles were gate-

keeper responses to the star's noncommercial film choices and offscreen activism—both behaviors that threatened rather than enhanced studio profits

9. Emotional moments in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are now material for parody, https://cheezburger.com/tag/marlon-brando and *On the Waterfront* offers opportunities puns, https://cheezburger.com/8347313408/marlon-brando-he-aint.

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Figure 3. An original theatrical poster for Viva Zapata! *(1952).*