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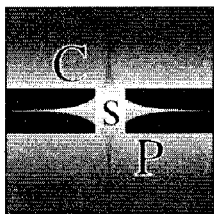
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Film and Television Stardom

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE GREATEST COWBOY STAR
YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF

AARON BARLOW

In his radio play *Artist Descending a Staircase*, Tom Stoppard has a character named Donner mouth this epigram: "Skill without imagination is craftsmanship and gives us many useful objects such as wickerwork picnic baskets. Imagination without skill gives us modern art" (83). The insult to modern art aside, imagination without skill actually does give us much more than Marcel Duchamp's found-art *Fountain*, whether we want it to or not. It often provides the motivation behind quests for fame (as opposed to quests for expertise) by those who dream of stardom yet lack the competence to attain more than the image of the dreams of others, by those who neither produce the creative visions themselves nor provide the means for bringing them to life—but who often *embody* the visions of more creative and able personalities. Oddly enough, some such people, themselves tools in the hands of visionaries and artists, sometimes actually do find themselves in what *they* regard as success: becoming stars of contemporary media.

In most other situations, imagination, when uncoupled from skill, has no outlet, no way of taking even the minimal craft necessary for creating that wicker picnic basket and moving it to a new level—to the height of art or to the intensity of acclaim. Yet, not even an imagination without skill can long remain bottled up. As fame does not itself require skill but only the *appearance* or *image* of skill (if even that), it often becomes the end product of imagination, replacing art and expertise, for it does, at least, provide an outlet for imagination. That is, fame, not creation or even any product based on craft, becomes the goal for many imaginative thinkers, especially those who have not bothered to spend the time to acquire actual skills or who have no real creative talent within themselves.

When fame is not based on *being* the best, but instead on *appearing* to be the best, the desire to develop skill, if it was ever there at all, really falls

away. This is certainly the case in media-enhanced fame, where the actuality of craft is not an immediately verifiable aspect of the performance base of fame. That is, fame itself, not the concept of "best" or of craft at all, becomes the ultimate goal, emptying out everything else. David Bowie put it simply when he spoke of fame as a phenomenon within which things are hollow, simply surface covering nothing. Too often, this is all there is to contemporary media stardom. It is not your brain or the things you can do, but rather the hypnotic flame that is almost impossible not to watch, that lies at the heart of fame today.

Perhaps we should consider, then, that if imagination so often leads only to the appearance of skill, Stoppard's Donner is possibly more right than funny. An argument could be made that fame itself really *is*, in many respects, the only modern art. Abstract expressionism might simply be nothing more than one aspect of fame, or one representation of an attempt to reach it. Put in a post-something-or-other vein, if fame is simply a hollow shell (i.e., an illusion), it may be no more than even a representation of a representation, a mirror of a mirror. Or, like abstract expressionism, it may be finally no representation at all, merely containing within it an *assumption* of a purposeful lack of representation still based on assumed skill or craft.

Fame, today, has come to exist primarily in the telling (or showing), not in the doing; not in the work, but in the impression of the work. Those artists who become infatuated with the doing or with the thing-in-itself find that they have to place fame on a lower, less important level, and they do so at a price. They discover that doing so, generally speaking, leads to an erosion of fame, if it existed prior to the infatuation, or to the disappearance of the possibility of fame. Some artists understand this well and, after achieving a certain level of fame, stop trying to maintain that level, turning back, instead, to a concentration on their craft; Bruce Springsteen, for example, deliberately set out to reach as high a level of fame (and of an income that would support his future endeavors) as he could with his *Born in the U.S.A.* album. Since that success, he has looked less to fame than to satisfying his own artistic drives.

Skill, imagination, image, and fame—these attributes (or the images of them) have become intertwined in today's society, so much so that it is hard to divide the perceptions of each from any possible thing-in-itself, making the appearance at least as important as the actuality behind it. Yet even fame based on imagination has to make use both of skill and the image of skill in order to be realized (although, as we will see, the skill need not be on the part of the famous, but it is still necessary to the creation). So, rather than trying to tease these attributes apart (which is

probably close to an impossibility), a better way of trying to understand their relations is to find someone whose activities involve all four of them, but in differing ways, and see how that life played out.

One person whose life exhibited each of the four attributes is Yakima Canutt, perhaps the greatest of the early stuntmen and stuntwomen who created the feats that the stars of film appeared to perform. Although he was a success in his time, part of his skill is exhibited by the reality that most people did not even know he existed. Despite the fact that he is as important a part of the development of U.S. cinema as almost any of the producers, directors, or actors of his day, he has never really been part of the studied history of Hollywood. Paradoxically (or so it might seem), it is that Canutt gave up fame that made his importance possible.

"Some of the things that people tell me I've done, I don't really remember doing—I've mainly been interested in doing, not in recollecting" (21), wrote Canutt in his autobiography, explaining part of why he willingly let fame slip through his fingers. Even though he remained one of the most successful (though certainly not in terms of money), most lasting, and most useful figures in the Hollywood film industry, the epicenter of modern media fame—as image, as imagination, at least—Canutt quite deliberately stepped aside, giving others the fame while he concentrated on his craft and what soon developed into an art. By giving up any desire for fame for its own sake, he became the man movie directors turned to for one important type of illusion, the one who had the skill to create the stunt vision and, therefore, the fame of others who would become associated with the deed. He could, in Wallace Stevens' phrase, "Let be be the finale of seem" (64), making "real" through the appearance of real. To succeed in this way, however, he had to give up any desire to *personify* the illusion—a stuntman cannot be at the forefront of a film. For one thing, he has to be replaceable, something a star cannot be. Yet, as I will demonstrate, it remains true that skill, imagination, image, and, yes, even fame were all part of this stuntman's career.

According to The Internet Movie Database, Canutt worked on more than two hundred films over his forty-year career. Nevertheless, as I have indicated, not many movie fans, even the true aficionados, have ever heard of him. Haven't heard of him, even though he starred in a number of films (they were western serials in the 1920s) during his first decade in the business and appeared in films at least up until World War II. Haven't heard of him, even though the memories of generations of moviegoers are peppered with images he created.

The full name of this "unknown star" was Enos Edward Canutt, although he was better known as "Yakima," or simply "Yak," the result of a

boast he made, one of the few of his that he proved unable to back up. At a rodeo early in his career, he was mistaken for one of a group of cowboys from Yakima, Washington. Somewhat drunk, he found this funny and boasted, "I'll show you what a Yakima bronc rider can really do" (Canutt and Drake 44), right before making a fool of himself by attempting to ride in an inebriated state and getting quickly bucked off, much to the delight of his spectators. "A photographer got a picture of me upside down.... The cowboys picked it up and started calling me 'Yakima,' which was soon cut to 'Yak.'" (Canutt and Drake 44). Canutt, who was not from Yakima himself, may have kept the nickname as a deliberate reminder that he should always be certain he could do anything he said he could. Certainly, he never made *that* mistake again.

That incident notwithstanding, he soon became a genuine bronco-busting star of the rodeo circuit, one of the best in the nation—and he stayed on top for several years. After a short stint in the Navy during World War I, he returned to the rodeos but soon got his start in motion pictures, working on a Tom Mix western as one of the outlaws. He was quickly cut from the cast, however, when he refused to stop shaving so that he would look disreputable enough for the part. The Hollywood bug had bitten him, though, and he soon returned for more.

Not one who could just stand around and watch, Canutt was soon helping to stage fights for the camera as well as acting. Other stunts, especially those involving horses (where he could use his rodeo skills), started to come his way. He began to get bigger acting parts and quickly found that he was having one hell of a time, making good money, wearing fancy outfits, and driving around in a Pierce-Arrow, one of the fanciest cars of the day. He writes, "I got my share of fan letters and requests for photos and was in demand for personal appearances at theaters, fairs, and rodeos" (Canutt and Drake 78). However, sound entered the picture and, as the cliché goes, it changed the movies completely, altering the commitment that had to be made to the craft of acting, among many other things. This was a commitment that Canutt had never made—and was not about to.

Canutt later claimed that he was not a success in sound pictures because of the timbre of his voice. I've heard him in a few of his sound films and disagree. I think it is either coincidence that Canutt gave up acting as sound came in or else that he did not want to put the work in that was necessary to developing the skills needed for the new type of acting, work that he knew would never lead him to the level of competence that would satisfy him. I also think he gave up acting because he had found that he was already becoming the best there was at a craft more fulfilling

to him than anything stardom (or acting, clearly not something for which he felt he had ability or inclination) could provide—he had discovered that he had both the skill and the imagination to create the *image* of skill on-screen through stunts (or “gags,” as they are often called) and, furthermore, to create stunts of a quality that no one else could match. Furthermore, nobody had ever tried to do the kinds of things he was doing; he was constantly breaking new ground, constantly achieving “firsts.” At the same time, he was also likely finding that, in the new environment, the creation of stunts was becoming so complex that he could not keep doing that and simultaneously continue acting; there just wasn’t enough time. And he kept himself busy. So well did he succeed that, by the end of the 1930s, almost every cowboy or action star owed a part of his reputation for skill on a horse and/or competence in a fight to Yakima Canutt. John Wayne, Errol Flynn, Gene Autry, Tex Ritter, Roy Rogers, Randolph Scott—Canutt worked with all of them and with many more, his own name disappearing from the screen almost completely in the meantime. All in all, credited and uncredited, as a stuntman himself or as stunt coordinator, Canutt worked on nearly every one of John Wayne’s early westerns and dozens of others *each year* through the 1930s. Later, as he reached an age when the stunts began to tax him too much physically, he moved from stunt work itself to stunt direction.

The better known of the films Canutt was involved with include *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Stagecoach* (1939), *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), *Cat Ballou* (1965), *The Flim-Flam Man* (1967), *Where Eagles Dare* (1968), *A Man Called Horse* (1970), *Rio Lobo* (1970), and *Equus* (1977). Those are but the tip of the iceberg: If anyone invented the profession of stuntman as we now know it today, it was he. If any one person created the excitement at the heart of 1930s (and later) westerns, it also was he. And that was not even to be the full extent of his career.

By the 1950s, Canutt had become a second-unit director, as he was for *Swiss Family Robinson* (1960), and sometimes in charge as the director himself, as with *Old Yeller* (1957). Always expanding his skills, by then he had developed a reputation for being able to work effectively with animals without harming them, so he was in demand anytime animals were needed as more than simply backdrop, finding himself working frequently (not surprisingly) on Disney projects.

Although he did finally receive an honorary Oscar in 1966 with an inscription reading, “For his achievements as a stunt man and for his developing safety devices to protect stunt men and women everywhere” (IMDB), Canutt remained relatively unknown (outside of the film industry itself, where he did become something of a legend) from 1926 (when he

had his last starring role) until his death in 1986. As should be clear by now, not even that Oscar inscription encompasses the depth or breadth of his contributions to the motion-picture industry. For not only did his concern for the safety of both people and animals help to make the stunt profession possible, but he really was "the greatest cowboy star you've never heard of."

The question still remains: Why is this the case? Yes, as I have said, Canutt certainly recognized that he would never be the best actor in Hollywood—but that has stopped few people. Why did it stop him? Why was he so interested in skill that he gave up fame?

From the time he was ten years old, Canutt had focused on his skills, on developing the ability to reach things that must have seemed virtually unattainable. For him, the setting of a near-impossible goal and then achieving it provided the rush that fame provides for others. Certainly, once he joined the professional rodeo circuit he enjoyed the accolades, but he rode to be the best—not to be the most famous. You did not win awards for looking good on a horse—you won for staying on far longer than anyone else could and for making the bronc jump higher at the same time (bronc riders actually goad the horses into trying to buck them off).

The mindset that made him a winner, one developed just prior to the days of mediated appearances of skill, one that allowed him to keep getting back on until he stayed on the longest and got the bronc to buck the highest, remained with Canutt the rest of his life and directed all of his other activities. That, of course, is why he gave up fame: He was never satisfied with seeming to be the best; he actually had to be the best. No "seem" satisfied him—unless it was someone *else* who "seemed" because of something Canutt actually could be.

Canutt really was the best at bronc riding and had the awards to prove it, awards that meant as much to him in his later years as any he had earned in Hollywood. But just about the time he discovered Hollywood, the rodeo circuit began to bore him. Sure, it gave him a place for exhibiting his skill, but it left little room for actualization of the flights of imagination that must have been racing through his mind. He could not go far beyond the events as they were laid out by the rules of the rodeo competitions. Hollywood could provide an alternative outlet for him.

What he found, however, was an industry that, even in its infancy, was already concentrating on fame and on showmanship, its skills all aimed at promoting them. But he had already discovered that fame did not really interest him (not for its own sake) and showmanship was not his *métier* at all. If he were to truly succeed in Hollywood, he would have to find a third avenue.

Although he does not explain why in his autobiography (the inference can be drawn, however), Tom Mix was an important figure to Canutt for reasons well beyond his having introduced Canutt to the movie industry. Mix was the other side of the coin from Canutt, a showman more interested in fame, in the cheers of the crowd, than in the "reality" of any accomplishment. Canutt came to recognize what this meant, and, though he had rejected it for himself, he certainly did understand its value. He even recounts overhearing a Mix conversation: "'It don't make a damn bit of difference what they say about you,' Tom said, 'as long as they keep bringing up your name'" (Canutt and Drake 67). Mix was almost a generation older than Canutt and could have been a role model. But he didn't always mix his imaginative stories with real skill, something that Canutt, who had probably heard frontier-style bragging tales all his life (certainly from the time he entered the rodeo), makes clear he thought little of—even though he clearly didn't mind using the showmanship of others, along with their desire for fame, to create his own works of art.

In the 1920s, Mix was one of the world's biggest stars, up in the Hollywood stratosphere with Charlie Chaplin and Greta Garbo. He was the mythological cowboy who became a movie star. Even today, his biographies claim rodeo skills for him, but these are probably exaggerated, based on his own stories. It is more likely that, as Canutt writes, while he did "work at mastering riding, roping, bulldogging, bronc riding, and shooting...his main attraction was always his tall tales" (59). Throughout his career, it was the stuntmen, the Yakima Canutts, not skillful as showmen but craftsmen in their own right, who created the image of skill for Mix and others like him.

From the beginning, there certainly was something about Mix's storytelling that made Canutt uncomfortable, and this discomfort is indicative of what was likely at the heart of Canutt's developing feelings about fame and the decision he made to give up acting (something, again, he would never be a master of) in favor of creating stunts. Canutt tells of another instance when he overheard Mix regaling people with tales of horse thieves and brigands bested single-handedly while sidekicks nodded and agreed, even though they knew the tales were not true:

When the group left, I turned to Mix. "Tom," I said, "you're a bit reckless with the truth, aren't you?" "What do you mean 'reckless'?" he retorted half-angrily. "They want to be entertained, so I took a few sequences from my pictures and turned them into reality.... They ate it up, didn't they?" (Canutt and Drake 59)

Mix would take fiction and turn it into the image of reality. Like Buffalo Bill Cody (another legendary showman), he would eventually take his act into the circus arena, even preferring that to the screen. The cheers of the crowd had become the be-all and end-all to him, something they never could be for Canutt, who soon learned to work another way, taking reality and manipulating it so that a fiction could "seem" real.

Like Canutt, Tennessee Williams adopted a place name for his own; unlike Canutt, however, he chose it to make himself distinctive, as a bit of pride, not as a reminder of the dangers of false pride. At the beginning of Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield, standing in for the author, speaks to the audience: "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion" (971). Tom Mix was the archetype of the stage magician Tom Wingfield refers to, and, like that magician, he was in need of an assistant to make the illusion work, a stunt specialist like Canutt. Tom Wingfield (although he does not admit it) needs a Canutt, too, his protests notwithstanding. His Canutt, of course, was that other Tom—Thomas Lanier Williams, known as "Tennessee"—who, like Canutt, was a creator of illusion.

For film, Williams and other writers provide the imaginative context and voice while Canutt and the stunt people provide the skills that often bring the characters to life, making the stage magician something more than a trickster and allowing for the creation of an illusion that contains truth both in its message and in the skill of its production. And that people believe.

No one was killed, for example, in the creation of the chariot race in *Ben Hur*, though many still argue that some were. Yet that race, albeit an illusion, contains real truth, real skill on the part of its creator, Yakima Canutt, and on the part of his son Joe, who doubled for Charlton Heston. And it was not just skill in creating illusion that was necessary for success, but also in working with horses and even in designing chariots—real, functional chariots. Even today, when stunts of astonishing magnitude can be created or manipulated digitally, that chariot race remains one of the best-known and most fondly remembered "gags" of all time. Much more than simply illusion went on in its creation; much more than simply illusion is evident when it is viewed on the screen.

Not long after Canutt had made his first steps into the film business, but while he was still primarily a rodeo competitor, he participated in an event at New York's Yankee Stadium and a parade to the stadium, during which a group of youngsters heckled him, yelling, "You can't ride like

Tom Mix” (Canutt and Drake 68). Yet Canutt was the World Champion bronco rider at that time, a riding status beyond anything Mix could ever have attained. Not even that incredible achievement, however, could match the allure of “Tom Mix.” No matter how good he was, Canutt could not compete with Mix’s image and, as he makes sure to note when relating the incident in his autobiography, Mix certainly was “a champ at the box office” (Canutt and Drake 68). His skill just wasn’t in riding. Still, for Canutt, such fame—adulation for something that had no skill behind it—must have seemed empty, meaningless. Yet he remembered this incident and it was important enough for him to recount it in his autobiography, for it made a point to him and about him. Sure, Canutt wanted recognition, but he wanted it for a *reality* of accomplishment and skill, not for the *appearance* of accomplishment or skill that he could create so well. Ultimately, as we have seen, he decided that it was more fulfilling to turn reality into fiction than, as Mix had done, to try to work it the other way around. Canutt’s skill with a horse, a gun, and his fists could be used to give the appearance of skill to another—and he was discovering that he had an additional talent, the imagination necessary for turning his skills into the images projected for the pleasure of others on the movie screen. That was much more satisfying to him than applause for simply appearing to do something he could not actually do.

Ironically, like Canutt, Mix moved away from acting as the central focus of his career at about the time sound came in, and many have argued that it was sound that was responsible for Mix’s career change, too. But it is not as simple as that. For Mix, ever the showman in need of immediate response, the sound stage was a further remove from the direct contact with audiences that he craved. Under the tyranny of the sound stage, no longer could a crowd of admirers throng the set; no longer could the directors shout encouragement to him as he acted out the scenes. The charm, for Mix, had disappeared from the movies. For Canutt, on the other hand, the addition of sound made the creation of stunts all that much more complex and challenging, providing a greater outlet for his racing imagination and forcing him to focus on just that pursuit.

Although he understood the difference between Mix and himself in terms of the crowd, Canutt never shied from accepting credit where he felt it was due. What he did not care for was such a concern for fame that it ended up as credit-grabbing—even by people whose work he respected—and there is always a hint of approbation when he writes about many of the others in Hollywood, even in his most kind comments about Mix, as a result. However, he also knew what there was to lose by not letting the credit-grabbers have their fame, their image of their own skill unfettered

by recognition of the real contribution of Yakima Canutt. Canutt recounts this story of why he never really worked for John Ford after *Stagecoach* (even though Ford had told him earlier that he would). After the film was completed, he and cameraman Bert Glennon were relaxing in a bar when the director and the film's editor happened along. The editor, who had just been over the whole picture, told Ford that it might be one of the best westerns ever. Glennon, for some reason, added that it was because of Canutt. "I glanced at Ford who was glaring at Glennon. I moved away but quick. I told Glennon later that not only did he cut my throat, but his own as well." (Canutt and Drake 114) And he had. Still, Canutt was one of those rare people who is unable to say much bad about anybody without qualifying it with something good. So, he follows that anecdote with another about Ford, concerning a call he got to do a stunt for Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) without Ford knowing it. Seeing him on the set, an annoyed Ford demanded to know what he was doing there. Canutt told him and then went off to do his work, worried that Ford might find a way to have him removed. Later, Ford saw him again. "'Your gag stunk,' he hollered after [Canutt]. 'Don't say anything about it until I get my money,' [Canutt] yelled back, and despite himself, Ford had to grin" (114-115).

Many stars claim that they would like to perform their own stunts and a few, such as Jackie Chan, often do. In most cases, however, they lack the necessary skills and are, of course, irreplaceable on the picture, meaning that only the most foolish of directors would let them get anywhere near the stunts that could lay them up in the hospital for months. However, some stars, as Mix did, begin to resent the stuntmen who actually have the skills so important to the star's image. Others, as John Wayne always did, pay attention to the stuntmen, not so that they can eventually replace them, but so that they can work with them to improve the seamlessness of their combined on-screen image. It is no wonder, then, that Canutt worked so frequently with Wayne, who understood the connections and separations of their roles quite well, perhaps more so than any other actor of his time.

Given that so few individuals in Hollywood have done so, Canutt's rejection of the possibility of personal fame is one of the most fascinating of Hollywood's many extraordinary stories. Canutt developed an extremely clear-headed view of the film industry (itself something of a rarity), so he was able to create the image of skill in order to create fame through the use of his own imagination—without getting confused by his own place in the process. Unlike Lina Lamont, Jean Hagen's character in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), Canutt was always able to keep image separate from his view of reality.

By the time that sound pictures emerged, Canutt understood the role of showmanship in movies and in relation to fame, too, and he knew that he was not that type of showman himself. Instead, he was one of the magicians behind the scenes, the one with the skills to create the illusions that those other creators of illusion—authors—imagined for the showmen to utilize without ever seeming to.

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