

The Malkovich Sessions

By Sandro Miller Glitterati, \$95



At long last, the John Malkovich coffee-table book we've all been waiting for! Or not, as the case may be. But here it is nonetheless: an oversized, lavishly printed, exquisitely unnecessary portfolio of the actor in various states of dress, undress, goofing, brooding, posing, mimicry, and parody. Malkovich the dandy, Malkovich the Theater Person, Malkovich the joker, Malkovich as The Joker. Malkovich done up as Hitler, Che, Lennon, Marilyn, Warhol,

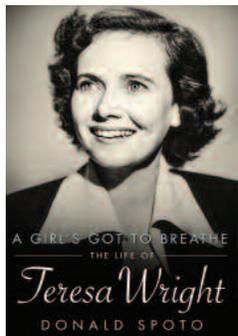
Picasso, Meryl Streep, Muhammad Ali. Malkovich simulating iconic photographs by Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe, Irving Penn, Dorothea Lange. Malkovich as Christ covered in piss (in homage to Andres Serrano's notorious *Piss Christ*). Malkovich as a priest clutching a sausage. Malkovich as a priest getting a blow job from an altar boy. Saucy! Provocative! Malkovich Malkovich Malkovich!

Invited by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company to shoot their publicity materials in the fall of 1999, the commercial photographer Sandro Miller initiated these "sessions" in the immediate wake of *Being John Malkovich*. If the structuring joke of that film is the improbability of Malkovich as a universal object of identification and desire, the genius of its execution depends on a virtuoso feat of auto-trolling. Malkovich is a great subject for a movie about Acting because the surface elements of his persona—fastidiousness, studied detachment, immaculate manners and mannered immaculateness—constitute a Theory of the Actor. At the same time, the humor of *Being John Malkovich* strikes deep because it opens onto the enigma of being *anyone*. Taken by themselves, these photographs provoke a smile at most, but if taken as a pseudo-sequel (*John Malkovich Being Other People*) they do expand on the metaphysics of Malkovich and may constitute an even more radical act of trolling.—*Nathan Lee*

A Girl's Got to Breathe: The Life of Teresa Wright

By Donald Spoto University Press of Mississippi, \$35

For a time in the 1940s, it seemed Teresa Wright could do no wrong. She made her screen debut as the honorable daughter to a viperous Bette Davis in *The Little Foxes* in 1941, followed by the doomed daughter-in-law in *Mrs. Miniver* and then the loving wife of Gary Cooper's Lou Gehrig in *The Pride of the Yankees*. These were roles that might have been insipid in the hands of a less



talented actress, but Wright had the rare ability to make goodness interesting on screen, and she garnered Oscar nominations for them all. For Alfred Hitchcock she next played Charlie, the innocent girl who gradually realizes her uncle is a serial killer in *Shadow of a Doubt*, one of the director's finest films. And in 1946 she had a major part in William Wyler's masterpiece, *The Best Years of Our Lives*.

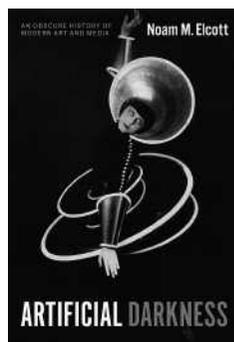
And then, almost as suddenly as her star had risen, Wright's film career began to fade,

hobbled by her first marriage to a demanding man (writer Niven Busch) and a dispute with Samuel Goldwyn that terminated her contract. Donald Spoto, who met Wright while working on his first book in 1974, knew the actress well, and for this authorized biography he was given access to her papers after her death in 2005.

Those who have read Spoto's many other books will be prepared for his highly opinionated writing style. It can be endearing, as when he defends the unjustly forgotten *Enchantment*, or irritating, as when he slams the "cult" of William A. Wellman's gorgeous *Track of the Cat*. Still, Spoto treats the challenges Wright faced—a miserable childhood, a troubled second marriage to the mercurial playwright Robert Anderson—with a partisanship that is clearly born of great devotion. Those of us who fell in love with Teresa Wright on screen will not object.—*Farran Smith Nehme*

Artificial Darkness: An Obscure History of Modern Art and Media

By Noam M. Elcott The University of Chicago Press, \$45



Before competing with neon exit signs and smartphone screens, cinemas were cloaked in darkness, a mystical abyss. How did these sites of ritualistic assembly and their spotlight offerings come to be? In *Artificial Darkness*, Noam M. Elcott examines the pioneering artists, particularly George Méliès, who transcended the novelty of magic lanterns and ghostly illusions to develop technologized darkness into an art. Elcott contends it was Richard Wagner, above all, who "set the technical and discursive parameters for artificial darkness in theatrical settings, parameters that would come to define not only cinema architecture, but also the cinematic subject." Wagner's stagecraft, notable for its luminous stage, pitch-black auditorium, and "invisible orchestra," in which a deeper, hooded orchestra pit kept musicians from sight and accentuated the audience's distance from the actors, created "a room made ready for no other purpose than [the spectator] looking in." This was a far cry from open-air Greek amphitheatres and overly lit 17th-century auditoriums, where the peacocking dukes and kings in attendance wanted, above all, to see and be seen.

The book's survey of German cinemas in Wagner's wake is particularly fascinating, including the interwar years, when inconspicuousness was a selling point. Enterprising theater owners touted their venues as the "darkest in town," predating a prudish backlash in the U.S. from the Edison Trust to woo middle-class viewers to "light theaters," where the possibility of degenerate behavior under the cover of darkness was curbed.

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Elcott examines various forms of trick photography and "black screen" techniques, including century-old experiments conducted in black bodysuits and skeleton costumes. Originally intended to chart human movement, these tests would anticipate the shrouded foot soldiers in French crime serials, notably *Fantômas*, and Walt Disney's breakthrough short *The Skeleton Dance*. Remarkably, an Edison crew once even filmed blacksmiths hammering away in black tunnels, a Spinal Tap-like quest to get more black. Elcott's mining of what Roland Barthes declared the "cinematic condition"—the urge to disappear into an "anonymous, indifferent cube of darkness"—proves enlightening.—*James Hughes*

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