

Anja Kirschner & David Panos

living truthfully under imaginary circumstances

Two Channel Projection: 'He Doesn't Know You Don't Love Him' (2011), *33 minutes, sound*.
Meisner Technique Instructor: Jeff Peterson. Actors: Jenna Berk, Samantha Dakin, Michael Goldsmith
Director of Photography Matthew Noel-Tod, Camera B: André Döbert, Sound: Chris Box
Script excerpt from 'Golden Boy' by Clifford Odets, 1937

Box Monitor 1: Excerpts from 'Sanford Meisner: The American Theatre's Best Kept Secret' (1985) *14 minutes, sound*.

Box Monitor 2: Some Meisner Trained Actors, *6min loop, silent*.

i DEPRESSION ERA

Meisner's technique is marked by two experiences of loss – personal & social: 1) guilt at death of his brother 2) economic crisis of the 1930s culminating in war.

Within the horizon of this personal/social catastrophe 'acting' is no longer equated with agency, but with 're-acting' to what has been set into motion by forces apparently beyond the individual's control.

To escape from guilt/debt into an imaginary life in which experience is always unfolding instantaneously; no past to regret – no future to fear.

ii HAPPINESS/THE HEAD

Within this broken life how can happiness be attained? Thought, analysis and theory only bring anguish. Happiness is found in the moment – in real emotion in imaginary circumstances (as the real circumstances are unbearable).

The 'head' is identified as the enemy because the kind of thought, the kind of analysis that could carry over into action is either not recognized, feared and repressed, or has turned against its own subject (who wants Stalinism?)

The 'head' is the enemy of 'happiness'. And 'happiness' is not just found in joy, but in any 'true' emotion snatched from the ambiguities of a compromised life, in grief too - grief disassociated or unhinged from the context that caused the original trauma, grief without confrontation of the real as the real.

iii THE REAL AND THE TRUE

The crucial difference between 'real' and 'true'. In the realm of 'truth' (with a capital T), the real and the un-real have become indifferent.

iv DRAMA IS CONFLICT

In Clifford Odets' play the 'Golden Boy' is trapped between art and violent entertainment. He chooses violent entertainment (what else is possible in capitalism?) – and when he tries to turn his back on it there's already no possibility to return.

Drama/dramatic action – by definition conflict – created out of the competing desires of its protagonists.

People, lovers, all fucked up by the logic of competition, distorting and complicating their own desires, turning on each other, killing in the ring, dying in a car crash.

v IMAGINATION

During a class Meisner uses the phrase 'living truthfully in emotional circumstances'. A student asks: "Emotional or imaginary? I have always heard imaginary." Meisner: "It's all imaginary. Do you think Hamlet was real?"

Authenticity within alienation. The more successful the imagination, the more honed the instinct, the more truthful the emotional response. Meisner's repetition never aims at producing a set of unimaginable alternatives, of breaking social logic, but at training the actor to filter their responses until only the most 'spontaneous', 'natural' responses to the present situation are left standing.

vi ROBINSON CRUSOE

Robinson Crusoe – the man who is shipwrecked by Defoe because he wants to understand, make sense of the confusion. But it cannot be understood on an island (away from the social) – it cannot be understood in imaginary circumstances (away from the social). His first contact immediately turns into an act of domination – Robinson over Friday – to Robinson this comes 'natural'.

Underneath the 'true' adventure of Robinson Crusoe lurks the intention to interest the English reading public in colonial enterprise in South America. Robinson's island is pinpointed as Tobago, the area is fertile and the natives (Friday) pliant.

Underneath the claim for truth there also is an unwritten injunction that says: 'Look no further!'. And underneath that 'Look no further!' there always lurks a soft sale.