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Acting Real: Mimesis and Media in Performance

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Lindsay Brandon Hunter

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Acting Real: Mimesis and Media in Performance

by

Lindsay Brandon Hunter

Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Sue-Ellen Case, Chair

Theater, historically, has served as a site for intense debates about ontology, specifically as concerns distinctions between what is real, in Plato's sense, and what is "merely" mimetic. Similar ontological debates have attended the development of new media technologies, which are often figured as enabling shady activities like impersonation, simulation, and piracy (on the internet, after all, no one knows you're a dog, and Photoshopped images of Iranian missile tests circulate globally nearly instantly), and arousing related questions about authenticity, identity and ownership. My dissertation brings debates about realness and mimesis to three sites of twenty-first century performance: intermedial theater, specifically the Wooster Group's 2007 *Hamlet* and the mediatized Burton/Gielgud *Hamlet* it deconstructs; reality television, specifically MTV's "scripted reality" show *The Hills*; and alternate reality gaming, in particular the 2007 future forecasting game *World Without Oil*. In each of these sites I examine the ways

mediatization and theatricality work, sometimes in concert and sometimes in conflict, to complicate and perform realness.

Questions of realness, authenticity and honesty have long haunted Western theater traditions, and so I use the lens of Western theatrical acting to address related questions in new media performance contexts. While only one of the dissertation's sites of analysis positions itself explicitly *as* theater, each is a theatrical situation that places its players in a subjunctive stance--one that depends on their acting "as if" circumstances were other than they are--and so evokes the concerns and "ontological queasiness" (Barish) that accompanies the mimetic activity of Western theater. In bringing together these disparate sites of mixed realities, I make a case for the opportunities this mixing and subjunctivity enable: mischievous interventions into supposedly stable differences between the real and its various others (the artificial, the fake, the feigned, the staged or rehearsed). An uncertain real is often described in terms of loss and threat, of radical instability that poses either overt or latent dangers. My argument, however, prioritizes the ways in which refiguring relationships to realness might be occasion opportunity, especially the opportunity for exploration, excitement, even productive mischief.

The dissertation of Lindsay Brandon Hunter is approved.

Janet O'Shea

Susan Leigh Foster

Joe Olivieri

Sue-Ellen Case, Committee Chair

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2013

This work is dedicated, with great love and gratitude,  
to Christopher Guilmet, who did not choose this project for himself  
but lived it anyhow, with enthusiasm and extraordinary generosity.

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“Can’t See Me,” “Strike Position.” *225 Plays by the New York Neo-Futurists from Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*. Ed. Joey Rizzolo. Chicago: Hope & Nonthings, 2011. Print.

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## *INTRODUCTION*

### *Memorex.*

When I think new media and mediatization, I often recall an advertisement I saw on television when I was a child. It featured a woman addressing the camera: “Is it me . . . ?” she asked. And then the camera pulled back to reveal that the image of the woman’s face previously filling the frame was itself a mediatized representation being shown on a large CRT television screen. The “live” woman herself was standing near the television bearing her image, and she finished the line with a smile: “. . . or is it Memorex?”

At least, this was my memory. When I watched the only record of the television commercial I can now find, I found the expected reversals that made the ad stand out in my memory--the apparent female face is repeatedly presented as “real” and then revealed to be itself a screen within the frame. However, the actor does not address the question I remember in the form I recall--it begins, rather, with her saying, softly, “Look at me.” And then, disturbingly, “Do you like what you see?” The performance seems perfectly poised to iterate stereotypes of women as decorative and dissembling sex objects; somehow simultaneously passive and mendacious, desirable and threatening. The female actor--objectified, flirtatious, attractive, and untrustworthy--is employed to sell a product that shares her changeability.

As a child, I was fascinated with the recursive loops of mediatization shown in the commercial. At its most basic, the message seemed to be that, given high enough fidelity, a mediatized representation could be apprehended as “real.” I found it exciting, in part, precisely because the ad did not seem to account for another layer of mediatization in the event: viewers

were asked to care about the reality of the original referent, the speaking woman, even though we had only mediatized access to her via our televisions and, by the commercial's own logic, could never be sure she was "real" regardless of the fidelity of the tape. It also bears emphasizing that the highly stylized gender performance of the actor--in heavy makeup and coded, through dress and manner, to read as vaguely "sexy"--seemed mediated by overtly stylized construction even before I knew to approach gender as a stylized construction in itself; it seemed rather doubtful even then that there was an immediate, natural or immanent woman accessible anywhere in the mix. Further, the slippage between my memory of the ad's slogan-- "Is it *me*, or is it Memorex?"--and the actual one--"Is it *live*, or it is it Memorex?"--points to a certain collapse, in the ad, between realness and liveness: while other ads in the series touted the new tape's fidelity by recounting examples of the like-live-ness of its reproduction of sound or video, this particular ad explicitly opposed the *real* person, not just her live presence but her status as *actually herself*, to the mediatized reproduction: "[I]t's *not* me! It's a recording of me, on new Memorex videotape."<sup>1</sup> The commercial's "trick" trades on the exciting and somewhat threatening notion that viewers could be fooled not only about liveness or degrees of immediacy, but about ontology--that a expertly produced representation or copy might be endowed by an unsuspecting subject as *the real thing*, as "me."

Yet, even as the commercial positioned video as a tricky beast to be viewed with suspicion, this potential danger seemed couched as vaguely exciting rather than apocalyptically dangerous. The viewer's error in mistaking the mediatized facsimile as "real" was thrilling,

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<sup>1</sup> In the ad, the line reading is a little more like, "It's *not* me! It's a recording of *me*--on new Memorex videotape," highlighting a potential aporia in which the embodied person and a recording of her performance are at once both the same and irresolvably different.

perhaps in part because the misprision seemed poised to destabilize a paradigm that was as stultifying as it was comforting. Much later, in the last years of the twentieth century, when moral panics erupted over the potential of the internet to abet all manner of shady activities vaguely associated with fraudulence--impersonation, piracy, doubling, and the attendant questions of authenticity, identity and ownership--I mourned this excitement: wasn't all the hand-wringing obscuring the possibilities for and of repurposing, multiplicity, productive subversion? At the risk of (playful) reduction, wasn't it kind of *great* that on the internet, people might not know you were a dog?

As media have become more diverse, more available, and more recognizably ubiquitous, the questions of ontology the Memorex ad poses, however shallowly, were taken up by the academy--perhaps most famously by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. In *Simulations and Simulacra*, Baudrillard discusses not only the second order of simulation clearly referenced in the Memorex commercial, in which the boundaries between the real and the represented become blurry and porous, but a third order in which those categories fail, in which the real is preceded by the simulacrum, leaving the possibility only for "a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (2). It sounds scary, this atmosphere-less hyperspace. Baudrillard's tone, in the piece, is infamously gloomy: this new era, he argues, "is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials--*worse*: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs" (2, emphasis mine). It is *worse* than it appears; "all of metaphysics is lost" in the "*desert of the real*" (1, 2, emphasis his). "[H]ow simulation appears in the phase that concerns us" is as panic: "Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production" (7). Loss, panic,

liquidation--of meaning, or at least the logic by which it was previously made; is it any wonder I first read Baudrillard's description (in translation) of the "operational double" which "deter[s] every real process" as *metastatic*, in the sense of cancerous tumors, rather than "meta[-]stable," his actual description (3)?

In this dissertation, part of my aim is to investigate changing ontologies not from the perspective of loss, which is certainly an inevitable function of change, but of opportunity. In emphasizing Baudrillard's focus on panic, anxiety, and loss, at the expense of his larger theories reads as superficial, I do so in the service of investigating a compelling contrast. I wish to prioritize, in the following chapters, the ways in which refiguring relationships to realness (which might certainly involve loss or adjustment of prior notions of a stable and known real) might be received other than with terror or woe. It seems that the disappearance of the "sovereign difference" that distinguishes the real from representation and the simulation from the model that supposedly (but actually, no longer) precedes it might also occasion opportunity (regicide or abdication often does), especially the opportunity for exploration, excitement, even mischief (Baudrillard 2). In the spirit of Donna Haraway, I wish to make an "argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" that the erasure of this assumed difference will allow (35). Without being uncritically hopeful about the potential of new media to *set us free from what ails us*, in each site the dissertation takes on, I argue for the proclivity of mediatization for *shaking things up*--for destabilizing easy oppositions between live and recorded, real and fake, the thing itself and its representation. Throwing definitions of reality and authenticity into question is unquestionably productive, not only of deserts, but of cyborgs, hybrids, multiple and fractured forms of presence.



The sites of the dissertation, introduced in greater detail in the following sections, each analyze a mediatized reality and the questions it evokes regarding realness. Each involves a collection of practices--performance strategies, practices of consumption, and playful negotiating--that allows for a pleasurable investigation into the slipperiness of the real. Performers working to embody mediatized performances, as in the Wooster Group; viewers seeking to highlight moments of overt construction and inauthenticity in reality programming, like audiences of the reality show *The Hills* do; gamers investing in a fictional, media-delivered reality that recognizes no fixed boundary and permeates quotidian life--these are all, to me, telling examples of a popular reconfiguring of notions of realness and authenticity that are exciting and pleasurable to users, spectators, and consumers. In each of the chapters introduced below, I show how practices that foreground the propensity of media to iterate, counterfeit, double or impersonate are necessarily investigating the potential power of a changing real. The interventions these performances are poised to make into notions of identity and performed character, authenticity and artifice, and spontaneity and scriptedness have resonance far outside the theater; they grapple with a non-theatrical reality where both performance and mediatization is ubiquitous, in which realness is daily exposed as contingent and negotiable in ways both frightening and exciting. I believe the dissertation's most important intervention may be to suggest that interrogation itself as a playful, pleasurable, even mischievous act. Baudrillard tells us that the loss of the "imaginary of representation"--something intermedial performance like the Wooster Group's, reality TV shows like *The Hills*, and alternate reality games like *World Without Oil* pointedly complicate rather than attempt to recuperate--is just that: a loss, potentially felt as a grievous, a heart-wrenching one; the loss of the real itself. Perhaps tellingly, each of the sites I

have chosen has been decried with similar vigor as heralding a loss and signaling a new, anxiety-filled era in which the real will be impossible to locate. I analyze them as, instead, arenas of substantial potential.

### ***Intermedial performance.***

After describing a number of views seeking to defend live performance from the damning effects of media, Philip Auslander addresses a certain form of nostalgia for the real (or at least for “real” presence) when he notes that “All too often, such analyses take on the air of a melodrama in which virtuous live performance is threatened, encroached upon, dominated and contaminated by its insidious Other, with which it is locked in a death struggle” (*Liveness* 41). From this dour perspective, intermedial work--like the Wooster Group *Hamlet* which, along with the Broadway show and mediatized record of the same which serve as the Group’s source material for the production, constitutes the site of analysis for the first chapter--might be characterized as “live performance succumb[ing] to mediatization” and in so doing losing “its ontological integrity” in a way both damaging and frightening (*Liveness* 46). The “melodrama” Auslander references might echoes Baudrillard’s pessimistic forecasting of the death of meaning that will attend the ascendance of the hyperreal.

In the first chapter, I follow scholars like Auslander himself, Roger Copeland, Cormac Power and Greg Giesekam in interrogating notions of mediatization as a polluting force poised to catalyze the ontological disintegration of live performance. I turn first to an analysis of the translation of the Gielgud/Burton *Hamlet* from its live production on the stage of the Lunt-Fontanne theater into an attempt at a hybrid product called TheatroFilm, one which promised to

preserve, through various strategies, the ontology of theater for a filmed recording. An examination of the claims made by producers for this mediatized record's conditional, as-good-as-liveness leads me to an examination of liveness in the theater, variously figured as peril, vulnerability, variation, spontaneity--the last of which seems to be widely revered as the seat of creative theatrical action, the special and vital quality that recorded entertainments cannot possess. Similarly, many theories of acting, especially ones which came to prominence in the U.S. in the later-middle twentieth century--notably, as video and television gained ascendancy--trade on spontaneity and immediacy and link those traits to truthfulness. I analyze the abiding ties linking liveness and spontaneity to truth within representational performance, and explore how their linked foundations might be interrupted by a theater that purposefully imbricates "live" bodily presence with mediatized content.

Andy Lavender asserts that such performance can constitute "a multiple theatre, where perspectives, ontological states, and meanings are not only plural, but simultaneously so" (190) while Gieseckam sees a wide range of possibilities for theatrical production in which "extensive interaction between the performers and various media reshapes notions of character and acting" and in which

scenography, mise-en-scene and dramaturgy are less easily disentangled, as the use of recorded media and live relay multiplies the scope of possible incidents, source materials, interactions, intertexts and issues, and the ways of presenting and perceiving them. The treatment of space, time and action often differs radically from dominant forms of theater, as the camera may introduce action from elsewhere and other times, past, present and future, or even places and action dreamt of or fantasized. Traditional boundaries between offstage and onstage become blurred, as the stage becomes the meeting-point of many locations, real and fictional, and of fictional characters with filmed real-world figures. Aristotelian and naturalistic approaches to storytelling or character depiction are often displaced, as multiple stories or no stories are told, performances become

more presentational than representational, and notions of unity of plot or character are overthrown. (8)

If theater is already an arena in which ideas of realness are in flux--it is a form that depends simultaneously on actuality and illusion, constituting, as Sue-Ellen Case writes, “a form of gesture that is somehow abstracted from the ‘real’ in spite of its warranting by actual bodies”--then its integration with mediatized presence or representation further complicates the performance’s relationship with what is valued as live, true, or real (165). As Auslander has written, “the common assumption is that . . . mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real,” effectively aligning liveness with realness and mediatization with something *other*--false, attenuated, polluted, less authentic (*Liveness* 3). Intermedial performances contend not only with the mixed bag of conflicts that theater and performance always already present, but adds the valence of explicit and integral mediatization.<sup>2</sup> Rather than characterize either mediatization or theatricality as an attenuating interpreter of the real which problematically distances the resulting representation from its origin, however, I investigate how the effects of mediatization and theatricality can destabilize and provoke the interrogation of binaries such as real/false, actual/simulated and natural/artificial. I investigate intermedial performance as a site in which the “sovereign differences” cited by Baudrillard are, in fact, productively threatened--if not entirely collapsed, also no not merely masked, but effectively

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<sup>2</sup> In a passage I will return to in the first chapter, Greg Giesekam identifies intermedial performance by distinguishing it from multi-media performance, highlighting the former’s “more extensive interaction between the performers and various media reshapes notions of character and acting, where neither the live material nor the recorded material would make much sense without the other, and where often the interaction between the media substantially modifies how the respective media conventionally function and invites reflection on their nature and methods” (8).

ontologically muddled. The intermedial performance that concerns me in this chapter irritates the reality principle, poking and prodding at its less-than-stable stance, rather than leave it in peace; these are performances in which realness investigated and laid bare to interrogation. When digital media and theatrical representation intersect--as in the Wooster Group's 2007 deconstruction of the Gielgud/Burton *Hamlet*--how much more unsettling or unfigurable the ontological standing of the resulting performances--how much more polyvalent their relationships to realness?

I turn to the Wooster Group's intermedial *Hamlet* in order to address this question by exploring the specific ways in which their mischievous work with source video undermines a mimetic proposition which depends on a stable and knowable real to ground its likeness. Specifically by analyzing Scott Shepherd's masterful, technical imitation of Richard Burton's famously passionate and vital stage acting, I suggest the potential of this and similar intermedial work to throw into question the real that serves as the referent for mimesis, as well as to untether the appearance of a performance style--say, Burton's passionate delivery--from its foundational epistemology: when Scott Shepherd's mimicry of Burton is called out as such through the simultaneous presence of the "original" source material, the audience sees something like Burton's volatile vitality produced through an explicit act of cool and functional mimicry, without any requirement for a fervent presentation ostensibly fueled by a similarly fervent internal state. In this work, is difficult to begin to separate Shepherd's (live, imitative) performance from Burton's (live-recorded, heralded as passionately original), even though the former is temporally live and physically embodied, and the latter is a heavily manipulated, often faint and partial projection from a more distant time and place. It becomes challenging--or even

impossible--to isolate the two actors' performances not only in terms of ownership or agency (who, exactly, is performing when Shepherd mimics Burton alongside Burton's moving image, their recorded and live voices intertwined?), but in terms of the way those performances are constructed and characterized--as the "real live" or as the charade of Memorex; as authentically vital or documentary and embalmed.

Like Gieseckam and Copeland, I find the liveness debates profitable when they place attention on what sort of valuable or innovative work theatrical performance might be poised to do in an intermedial context. Gieseckam may make the the most powerful claim for intermedial theater of all the scholars cited here when he argues that, unlike more conventional theatrical productions which may deploy media but in which "little significance adheres" to that media use, those performances in which media actually co-constitute the performance may destabilize the "ideological assumptions which underpin dominant representational conventions" (8). By moving from an early attempt to hybridize liveness and recording technologies--the Electronovision Theatrofilm, which simultaneously vaunted its new form as revolutionary *and* attempted to efface the mediatizing act that constituted it--to a contemporary intermedial deconstruction, I analyze the potential of media integration to, as Cormac Power describes it, exploit the meaningful capacity *all* theater possesses "to multiply perspectives by complicating time and space." By rejecting the nostalgic appeal of the "narrow and rather idealistic notion of unproblematic immediacy" liveness is often figured as, I concern myself instead with "the ways in which theatre constructs presence" itself, as well as the opportunity intermedial theater has to illuminate that construction (169).

### ***Reality television.***

The second chapter takes on a televisual genre bemoaned by critics for its vapidness, sometimes accused of presaging the demise of “quality” television, and often dismissed by knowing viewers as oxymoronic: reality television. The multiple commitments of reality television, its dependence both on actuality and highly apparent manipulation, results in a sort of generic hybridity which in turn changes the available frames that surround “real” or factual televisual content; John Corner suggests that a “new ecology of the factual” engendered by the popularity of reality TV has implications not only for “all forms of televisual documentary,” but in the non-televisual realm as well. “By ‘performing the real’ with such strategic zeal,” he writes, “. . . Perhaps [reality television] marks a shift, too, in the nature of that broader sphere, a sphere where vectors of both structure and agency combine to produce experience, that John Hartley has suggestively dubbed ‘popular reality’” (58). Reality TV’s integration of self-conscious, highly manipulated performance with putative grounds in authenticity and actuality makes it a site in which realness, especially figured as personal authenticity, can never be singular, simple, or taken for granted. The scholar Mark Andrejevic notes pithily that when one of the most effective ways to assure success in certain reality shows is to work diligently at *seeming* authentic within a patently artificial scenario, “reality ha[s] itself become a strategy” (127).

Interestingly, Baudrillard, also describes the real as a strategy, and points to a precursor to contemporary reality television--a 1972 PBS experiment called *An American Family*--in order to illustrate the real’s collapse. In *An American Family*, the Louds of Santa Barbara, California (a white family of upper-middle class privilege) allowed their daily interactions to be recorded in situ within their household. Not incidentally, during the period in which the camera crews

recorded the family members' lives, the marriage between Pat and Bill Loud disintegrated and the couple separated. Susan Murray notes that the show was characterized by producer Craig Gilbert as a "real-life soap opera" in regard to its narrative structure, but [that he] crafted it using many of the stylistic techniques of the direct cinema movement," emphasizing its documentary look-and-feel and yielding a generic hybridity that "befuddled critics," who compared it "to everything from home movies to situation comedies" (65). Baudrillard calls this experiment "TV verité," and then finds the term "admirable in its ambiguity[:]" does it refer to the truth of this family or to the truth of TV?" In fact, Baudrillard concludes,"it is TV that is the truth of the Louds, it is TV that is true, it is TV that renders true" (28-90). In a tone seemingly intended to consternate, Baudrillard warns that this predecessor of contemporary reality TV makes plain that "the medium itself is no longer identifiable" but rather "intangible, diffused," resulting in "a viral, endemic, chronic, alarming presence of the medium," a "dissolution of TV in life" and "dissolution of life in TV" resulting in "indiscernible chemical solution: we are all Louds doomed not to invasion, to pressure, to violence and blackmail by the media and the models, but to their induction, to their infiltration, to their illegible violence" (30).

As in the other sites under consideration in this dissertation, I find a wider range of possibility, here, in the destabilizing of the real. Through analysis of a particularly generically hybrid reality show--MTV's *The Hills*--I argue in this chapter that viewers are experimenting with the instability and apparent porosity of the real. These viewers demonstrate a fascination--and a burgeoning facility--with notions of reality and authenticity as constructed, modifiable, and potentially co-incident with artificiality, theatricality, and even fraudulence. The viewing practices I analyze do no suggest an audience's panicked death-grip on a failing real, nor a



violently invaded public put in harm's way by a diffuse and intangible medium that can no longer be located. Though I do not think Baudrillard is wrong about the "dissolution of TV in life, dissolution of life in TV," my reading suggests a public that has indeed been suffused by a medium (by now, probably plural media), but for whom reality TV's revelation of such permeation may work as excitingly uncharted, even unlocatable territory of possibility rather than an inescapable "viral" pandemic.

The chapter takes a close look at early television in order to suggest that even in its novelty, the televisual medium may never have perfectly "identifiable," as it has long been a form of media deeply imbricated with liveness, intimacy and *immediacy*. I examine television's roots in live broadcast (another potentially rich oxymoron), following Jane Feuer's assertion that while liveness may no longer be television's ontology, it remains its ideology. Moreover, television, and perhaps more importantly television *acting*, has historically been specifically charged with offering intimacy and access, making the personality and persona of the actor a necessary and significant ingredient, in a way that contributes to a considerable blurring of on- and off-camera realities. Without claiming that all television is, or has historically been, "reality" television, early TV yields ample evidence of the complex relationship the emerging medium had with realness.

Reaching forward to contemporary reality television, the chapter looks at the ways which realness is required, constructed, and challenged in reality TV, a genre of television simultaneously dependent both on its claim on actuality and authenticity ("real" people, "real" events; the suggestion of unrehearsed action) and concomitantly on the artifice necessary to create a marketable product (including careful casting, editing, positioning, marketing and

framing). I focus on a particularly challenging instance of reality television's seeming paradox: MTV's *The Hills*, a show sometimes referred to as "scripted reality" due to its carefully managed, cinematic look and sound (a far cry from the available light and sound of early reality TV) and the seemingly rehearsed banality of its content. The chapter turns its attention not only to the production of reality television, but also to its consumption, analyzing the ways in which reality television viewers endow themselves as savvy negotiators of authenticity as they parse and appreciate the shows' competing displays (of authenticity and actuality, on one hand, and of neat and conventional dramatic arcs, archetypal "characters," and clichéd presentations, on the other). The produced, constructed or staged self/persona, in the model I propose viewers are experimenting with, can be other than a fraudulent version of the essential or "real" self; rather, a creative and exciting one, possibly even one that evokes the pleasure of Donna Haraway's cyborg I referenced earlier, and will bring up again in the second chapter--the pleasure to had in "the confusion of boundaries" that (fail to) distinguish the natural from the artificial (among other bounded qualities). Reality television, in a sense, transgresses these boundaries as well; if not exactly between organic human and cybernetic machine, certainly between what Haraway calls the "troubling dualisms" of "reality/appearance . . . [and] truth/illusion" (35). Haraway suggests that "[a] cyborg world"—our world, in and outside of reality TV, since Haraway persuasively insists that the cyborg is already our ontology—"might be about lived social realities in which people are not afraid . . . of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints" (13).

### ***Alternate reality gaming.***

The theater scholar Roger Copeland takes issue, in a point that effectively joins the three sites concerning this dissertation, with Baudrillard's naming of "schizophrenia" as "the inevitable result of our current situation in which the body becomes an extension of the television screen" (Copeland's words, 37-8). After giving some examples from the theater in which characters (one "certifiably schizophrenic") enact within a staged drama "the blurring of the boundaries between the two sides of the television screen," Copeland points out, with irony, that Baudrillard finds telecommunication and its apparatuses, including television, rather *too* present--powerfully omnipresent, forcing a "categorical imperative of communication," of which television seems to be only a single (though a major) part. Baudrillard mourns that "we will have to suffer this new state of things, this forced extroversion of all interiority, this forced injection of all exteriority":

If hysteria was the pathology of the exacerbated staging of the subject, a pathology of expression, of the body's theatrical and operatic conversion; and if paranoia was the pathology of organization, of the structuration of a rigid and jealous world; then with communication and information, with the immanent promiscuity of all these networks, with their continual connections, we are now in a new form of schizophrenia. . . . [T]his state of terror proper to the schizophrenic, too great a proximity to everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance . . . (*Ecstasy* 132, qtd in Copeland 38)

In other words, telepresence and the media that make it possible is not only reconfiguring notions of presence, but making some sort of newer, media-enabled presence frighteningly inescapable. Our "too great proximity to everything" is unclean, and increasingly unavoidable; the mixing, the "continual connections" and the "promiscuity" they herald will necessarily render us confused and ill, suffering a schizophrenic's dilemma.

While I differ predictably with Baudrillard in his conception of the terrifying vulnerability of this new “schizophrenic,” the figure itself is of particular interest to the third and final chapter. It concerns alternate reality gaming, a practice that plays at constructing immersive, fictional game-worlds, worlds which might be seen to pretend to an “unclean promiscuity” in their attempt to escape any frame of their fictionality and to circulate unfettered, masquerading as actual or at least effectively masking their difference from the real. A large section of the chapter is devoted to characterizing--and then roundly refuting--the concern that arose in the early days of ARGs’ commercial development; there seems to have been considerable concern that all players enjoying these games-pretending-not-to-be-games were at risk for being sucked into a version of *Ender’s Game* or a malevolent Star Trek holodeck, in which they would lose all consciousness of the difference between a simulated or virtual world and the real or actual one. The games scholar Jane McGonigal describes one such critic deeming ARGs “schizophrenia machines,” drawing on the word’s frightening power to suggest the consequences of experimenting with multiple realities.

McGonigal herself thoroughly debunks the supposed danger of ARGs, suggesting that gamers are knowing participants in an elaborate fiction which plays at effacing its own fictionality rather than solicits total commitment to a fantasy--an investment that would mark gamers as, in her words, “a particularly credulous lot” (*Real 2*). McGonigal herself maintains that gamers are explicitly conscious of the conditions of the game in a way that allows them to enjoy a pleasurable “performance of belief,” a stance which requires clear delineation between actual belief--in a fictional game premise, in the reality of fantasy plot--and the kind of layered, self-conscious make-believe she characterizes as *performing belief* (*Might Be 320*). With this

distinction established, she argues emphatically that ARGs do not do the dangerous work they were once accused by critics of doing: the blurring of boundaries between the real and the fictional/virtual, a frightening porosity that might allow us to leak into the *Matrix* without realizing it.

While I will save a longer discussion of ARGs as games for the chapter itself, in order to understand this distinction--and the panic that led McGonigal to point it out--it may be helpful to emphasize that in alternate reality games, players agree to adopt a fictional, game-specific world or set of circumstances as “real,” and behave accordingly. ARGs are conducted across multiple media platforms--gamers communicate with each other and with in-game personae via SMS, chat, online bulletin boards and sometimes “in person”--and employ real-world objects as fictional, in-game artifacts (for example, a movie poster that carries out its usual function but also contains game clues hidden for the careful reader, or a website or blog belonging to or advertising for an in-game character or entity that no clue to the casual observer that it exists as part of a game).

I argue that despite gamers’ clear consciousness of the framing that surrounds ARGs--the sophistication and strategy of their knowing play, as figured by McGonigal--ARG play *does* offer a chance to play with the blurring and blending of actuality and fiction, theatricality and “plain” behavior, the playful and the sincere. This blurring, further, is not the endangerment critics have suggested, nor the one that McGonigal denies in her debunking of the credulous gamer, but an opportunity to explore the real as multiple, partial, and constituted rather than immanent. The hard and fast distinction McGonigal offers between actual belief and its performance hinges on gamers’ knowingness, their agency, the self-consciousness with which

they supposedly direct every part of their play, including the times in which they consciously play at suspending their disbelief. However, while gamers are undoubtedly savvy to the games' pretenses, stories of ARG participants are rife with anecdotes that show ARG play to work unexpected and unsought practical change in gamers' lives outside the game, changes that exceed gamers' expectations and desire, and the boundaries of the game. Without suggesting that gamers are the "particularly credulous lot" that McGonigal thoroughly discredits, I argue that their knowing agency is necessarily incomplete and cannot tell the whole story. When the game (or performative aspects of its play) affects gamers in ways they do not choose or anticipate, the alternate realities of the games and the quotidian actuality of daily life *do* blur for gamers.

In fact, some McGonigal's own work stands as a compelling example of this. Her (with Ken Eklund) 2007 ARG *World Without Oil* asked participants to imagine how their lives would change during a radical oil shortage, and to generate and practice ideas for lifestyle change as part of the game. Interestingly, many participants reported that the game was life-changing, that the changes and awareness they adopted as part of the game persisted long after the game officially closed. One of the great successes of the game, from the points of view of designers and players alike, was a change in player awareness, circumstances, practices and sympathies that exceeded the game and its fictionality, rendering actual change that lived on long past the game's end date. The chapter examines them as a locus where the real and the virtual interplay, and where the lack or presence of mediatization is an important factor in negotiating the realness of an experience. ARG play has much in common with the acting and performance, theatrical and televisual, discussed in the previous two chapters, specifically its demand on a subjunctive

mood of action: players act *as-if* given circumstances are true. By investigating subjunctive, virtual play that escapes the theater and the mediatized spaces of virtuality found online, I hope to tie the previous two chapters together to conclude an analysis of both playful and sincere action in mixed-reality contexts.

***In conclusion (to the introduction), the malingerer.***

Despite my announced intention to adopt a set of priorities different from Baudrillard's, I am particularly fond of, and find much to explore in, his illustration of simulation through the figure of the simulating malingerer<sup>3</sup>:

To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. . . . But it is more complicated than that, because simulating is not pretending . . . [P]retending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the "true" and the "false," the "real" and the "imaginary." Is the simulator sick or not, given that he produces "true" symptoms? Objectively, one cannot treat him as being either ill or not ill. Psychology and medicine stop at this point, forestalled by the illness's henceforth undiscoverable truth. For if any symptom can be "produced," and can no longer be taken as a fact of nature, than every illness can be considered as simulatable and simulated . . . . (3).

Baudrillard, at least in the context of the larger essay, paints this as rather threatening--and certainly it is in his example, at least for the forces represented by medicine, psychology, and the army. It gives me, however, the same kind of thrill that the Memorex commercial did, many years ago. Although the commercial in one sense depends, rather precisely, on the reality principle Baudrillard says the simulation will take down--or at least on the oppositional notion

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<sup>3</sup> I like this word, "malingerer," to describe Baudrillard's figure, despite the fact that Baudrillard is actively distinguishing between the usual operation of malingering--a pretending, a faking--and the possibilities of simulation. By using it, I do not mean to collapse this difference, only to reference the described shift from an "older" action of malingering, involving dissimulation and pretending, to the simulation of illness Baudrillard describes.

that that principle safeguards--it also hints at the possibility of the principle's failure or irrelevance. It suggests--or did to me, at when I was very young--that viewers were already capable of being fooled, or would be soon, and that at that point every visage would potentially be Memorex (or something like it), and that we might not really mind.

The performative opportunities that arise in this situation might easily thrill: if the idea of the symptoms' truth or falsity loses meaning, fails to function as a workable differential, performativity rules. The question becomes not whether the symptom (or the person) is true or real, but is it made manifest, does it come into being through its own performance. Baudrillard writes that "in the past," the military would try to divine the truth and judge the truth of a patient's (lack of) illness, but "today," can discharge a "simulating homosexual, heart patient, or madman" as just that. This shift seems to have enormous, and undeniably exciting, implications for the performativity of identity: if simulators are undetectable--if, to be irreverent, the Cylons look like us now--they are already everywhere, and they are already us. This is the discomfiting loss of certainty that leaves the reality principle shattered, but the dismissal of meaningful distinction between the sick and the simulating also uncovers potential. Decisions regarding what is "real"--what sicknesses, what symptoms, what affects, what identities--who does the deciding, what criteria are used--these, of course, never exist in a vacuum. Challenging (or deeming non-functional) the hierarchical system which assigns, authoritatively, "truth" to some states of being and not others is an action or project with clear political potential. Certainly it might be welcomed as not only exciting but potentially politically efficacious. Even if anxiety plays a major part--or the predominant one--in the recognition of the precession of simulacra, let



us also investigate the ways in which the shift might be played with, investigated, enjoyed and exploited rather than, or at least in addition to, regarded with anxious panic.

To the extent that the sites of analysis that follow, each of which exposes realness as contingent, slippery, and otherwise not to be trusted, have evoked anxieties, perhaps they do bear a resemblance to the panicked populace Baudrillard suggests--or do so at first glance. In each site, however, there is something enthusiastic about the playfulness with which the real is interrogated. In the pages that follow, I cast these actions as pleurably exciting explorations of a mutable real: moves and practices that, rather than betraying a desire "to safeguard the principle of a truth at all costs and to escape the interrogation posed by simulation," suggest such an interrogation as interesting and valuable work (Baudrillard 3). If the implications of an unstable real can inspire panic, they might also inspire curiosity--or, more to the point, *mischief*, with all its attendant possibilities and projects. The work of mischief is the work of playful disruption, of unsettling; it often involves slyly, obliquely poking at established hierarchical power and the reverence with which it is obeyed. While mischief may not be efficacious in the manner of revolution, it is nonetheless a productive act: it investigates, it questions, and--in the cases I describe in the following chapters--it takes an active hand in navigating the possibilities of a changing real.

## *CHAPTER ONE: ELECTRONOVISION, THE WOOSTER GROUP AND THE REAL-LIVE*

### *Introduction.*

In this first chapter, I use as a case study three performances of the 1964 Richard Burton/John Gielgud *Hamlet*: the original stage play, performed on Broadway; the mediatized version of the play marketed as “Theatrofilm,” made possible by a then-new technology called “Electronovision”; and the Wooster Group’s 2007 intermedial re-staging of the Electronovision Theatrofilm recording. As the focus moves between conventional “live” theater to a mediatized recording to an intermedial deconstruction, I discuss the complex relationships between liveness, mediatization, and intermediality; and mimesis, realism and mimicry.

Liveness, fetishized in a contemporary context in which mediatization is nearly ubiquitous, is often considered a constitutive aspect of theater, but is more pointedly associated there with excitement, peril, vulnerability and variability; these are qualities that appear to differentiate live performance from mediatized entertainments, which are understood as standardized products, consistently repeatable. Liveness can also, in a larger context outside the theater, mark an event or performance with realness and legitimacy; as Philip Auslander suggests, “the common assumption is that the live event is ‘real’ and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real,” however problematic that assumption might be (*Liveness* 3). Though my concern with the 1964 recording of a live production of *Hamlet* certainly brings up already rehearsed arguments regarding liveness and the ontology of performance, my intent is not to rehash those debates, but to investigate how liveness as a seeming guarantor of authenticity interacts with mimesis, which Elin Diamond

writes both posits and relies on "a *truthful* relation between word and world, model and copy, nature and image" (*True-Real* 363, emphasis mine). My particular concern is with realism, which Diamond characterizes as "mimesis at its most naive," which "depends on, insists on a *stability* of reference," a recognizable likeness to "an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge" (366, italics in original). If liveness appears to grant, or is at least associated with, authenticity, realness and truth, the mediatization of mimetic performance evacuates the realness that liveness connotes, even if what was "live" was not the thing itself but a skillful reproduction. The apparent absenting of liveness, the rendering of a "real" performance into an mediatized reproduction even further removed from that objective world that guarantees knowledge must burden, or at least complicate mimesis by seeming to attenuate that "truthful relation," by allowing another degree of separation between representation and referent (366). Put another way, both mimesis--or at least realism, with its "fetishistic attachment to the true referent"--and mediatization can be defined through their relationship with truth and/or realness: each renders a mediated copy, whether through reproduction or imitation, one of questionable legitimacy if the stability, legibility or transparency of its relationship to the referent is questionable. Despite the "varied enunciations" of mimesis, which exceed the theater and certainly exceed the limitations of theatrical realism, Diamond reminds that "there is in all mimetic representation an implied axiology, the upholding of truth" (363).

I turn first to an analysis of the translation of the Gielgud/Burton *Hamlet* from its live production on the stage of the Lunt-Fontanne theater into an attempt at a hybrid product called Theatrofilm, one which promised to preserve, at least partially, the ontology of theater in a

filmed recording. The producers aimed to achieve this partly through the manufacture of a sort of enforced ephemerality--a plan to remove the record from circulation after a limited number of showings, in a sort of reversal of the documentary function often associated with recording technologies--and partly through a recording process that allowed the film record to be made in the Broadway house, with a live audience and most of the conventions of a theatrical performance in place. Their rhetoric (voiced most prominently by Burton, who was a producer of the Electronovision/Theatrofilm experiment) in advertising and promotion stresses the preservation of certain aspects of live performance in the resulting, putatively hybrid product (most notably the actors' peril, should they misfire during the recorded performance). An examination of the claims made by producers for this mediatized record's conditional, as-good-as-liveness leads me to an examination of liveness in the theater in relation to those terms or qualities: peril, vulnerability, variation, spontaneity--the last of which is often revered as the particular domain of the human artist, enabled through the liveness of performance. Liveness in this sense is taken as the foundation for inspiration, for idiosyncrasy, for artistic spontaneity in a way that vaunts the unpredictable live human artist above iterable reproductions, in a similar implied axiology, perhaps, to the one Diamond references.

Further, I analyze how popular notions about the differing qualities and possibilities of live and mediatized performances might be unpicked by a close examination of both, which reveals the potential for mediatization to render performance *less* stable than is often suggested, and live performance often emphatically template-driven rather than constituted by acts of spontaneous inspiration and creativity driven by an unpredictable human artist. The 2007 Wooster Group *Hamlet* based on the 1964 Theatrofilm is an excellent site for this

analysis, as the piece stands not only as an intermedial work par excellence, capable of provoking a reconsideration of both liveness and of mediatization, but as something of a meditation on acting itself as a creative or interpretive act, as it both channels and re-forms the performance of an iconic classical actor well known for his passion and volatility.

The make-believe that actors enact on stage is often understood to be warranted by their realness and liveness, the actuality of their bodies--by which I mean not only that they are present and embodied in the moment of performance, but that their staged dissembling is somehow anchored by the actor's reference to and dependence on her "real" self in her acting work. Auslander characterizes such theater as "logocentric," where the *logos* is not necessarily the playwright's text, but often the director's concept and, more interestingly, the actor's (perceived) self. He notes that "We often praise acting by calling it "honest" or "self-revelatory," "truthful"; when we feel we have glimpsed some aspect of the actor's psyche through her performance, we applaud the actor for "taking risks," "exposing herself" (*From Acting* 29). Though this sort of praise specifically recalls the stereotype of the "Method" actor (one who works exclusively "from" herself and her own experience, and demands ruthless authenticity, paradoxically, in the work of impersonation), Auslander is writing more generally about a mainstream contemporary theater in which the tenets and markers of realism are entrenched enough not to be visible as style, and in which the transparency of self-revelation is a standard criterion for performance.

Even when considering the work of actors who do not practice with such rigid and problematic demands for "authentic" stage behavior--and the unschooled and unstudied Burton, whose work bore little resemblance the "Method" stereotype I describe above, was

certainly one of these--role and "self" are inextricably imbricated in a way that foils an attempt at effective separation of the performer from the role in the moment of performance. As Joseph Roach has observed, theatrical performance consists of "the simultaneous experience of mutually exclusive possibilities--truth and illusion, presence and absence, face and mask. Performers are none other than themselves doing a job in which they are always someone else, filling our field of vision with the flesh-and-blood matter of what can only be imaged to exist" (*It* 9). Roach's study includes notable actors (not unlike Burton), who are particularly visible as such inside and alongside their roles, even if what is visible is better described as a highly constructed, public persona than a "real self." Burton, for example, was often considered a "natural" actor even though he eschewed the Method or any Stanislavskian training, his work often attributed to an essential selfhood rooted in his masculinity, his Welshness, his intellect, or any number of attributes. This chapter does not make an argument for the "realness" of any offstage selves visible in performance, but does explore the ways in which mediatization--and particularly intermedial theatrical work--can interrupt a perception of performance, even performance that escapes the particular extremities of the Method as truthful, grounded by or in the real. Given the importance of realness to the theater (paradoxical, Roach reminds us; always composed of both the actual and the virtual) and to acting (the performers' "real" bodies often charged with producing a seemingly artless authenticity under patently artificial constraints), theater that plays with mediatization has rich potential to call into question the ways in which realness has functioned as a ground for theater's precarious ontology.

There are, of course, certain schools or techniques of acting more intensely concerned with truth and authenticity than others; the rhetorics and logics of the psychorealist acting techniques commonly taught in the United States--including the ones in which I was trained in the mid-nineties and early twenty-first century--rely overwhelmingly on similar notions of truth and honesty in performance, disturbingly reifying and producing the troubled reality they pretend to reflect. While realism been extensively and rightly critiqued by feminist and other scholars,<sup>4</sup> I believe a consideration of these techniques' reliance on *liveness* has been underexamined. I mean not that techniques like Sanford Meisner's and Uta Hagen's are considered applicable only to live theatrical performance--their practice is just as, if not more prevalent (and commercially successful) in film and television production as in theater--but that those later techniques depend, in a way Stanislavski himself did not, on the actor's responsibility to a vanishing live moment in performance to produce an apparent spontaneity necessary for unmediated, revelatory "truth." For later proponents of 'organic' acting techniques, as I will demonstrate, Stanislavski's all-important "real experiencing" on stage is couched in terms of spontaneity and impulsivity, immediate responsiveness to the mercurial circumstances of each passing moment. In these techniques, spontaneity and impulsivity are the supposedly the necessary precursors to "honest" or "truthful" performance, and the techniques attempt to strip away that which separates or distances an actor from her immediate, impulsive response--"impediments," disturbingly, like intellectual rigor or critical thought.

And, of course, the range of responses legible as "honest" are those within appropriate social

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<sup>4</sup> Elin Diamond succinctly notes that "setting out to offer truthful versions of experience, realism universalizes but one point of view, ignoring the force-field of human-social contradiction. In the process of exploring social (especially gender) relations, realism ends by confirming their inevitability" (*Unmaking* xiii)

norms, which may be specifically restrictive--as in what constitutes “real” femininity--and subject to putatively universal standards of “human nature.”

It is this concern with the relationship between the liveness of truth and the *realness* of realism which links my study of realist acting--the rhetoric and notions mobilized to train actors in this particular kind of mimetic craft--with the mediatized or intermedial performance which foregrounds its own explicit interruption by media, its literal lack, wholly or partially, of the *immediacy* that those acting techniques foreground. The chapter concludes with my analysis not only of the Wooster Group’s *Hamlet*, but of their use of mimicry in that work and others, which I argue allows them to “borrow” styles of theatrical presentation, including realism or naturalism, in which they have no ideological investment. Put another way, masterful mimicry of the naive mimesis that is realism allows the Group to play with the effects of the style without formally subscribing to its underlying logics and their problematic implications--to try it on, to reap its benefits even as they expose its gaps and contradictions. When the Group reproduces, through mimicry, the “natural,” passionate work of Burton within a hybrid, *un-natural* context of semi-liveness that deconstructs a recording of a live performance--a recording that *itself* claimed to hybridize the live and the mediatized--the stage is set for an almost over-rich deconstruction not only of liveness, but of mimetic acts and their relation to truth. At the very least, I argue, this work allows for productive, even evocative use of realism’s attractive effects while mischievously prodding its politics. It may be possible, even, to unseat some of realism’s foundational premises in the process, bedeviling its promise of access to a stable real by using its tools to showcase compelling artificiality and deliberately ambiguous truths.



### ***The 1964 Burton/Gielgud Hamlet.***

The 1964 stage production of *Hamlet* starring Burton and directed by Gielgud was recognized as daring, even challenging, if perhaps less than revolutionary. Press accounts of the production rarely fail to mention its unusual aesthetic: the production was blocked on a relatively bare stage, used very few props, and was, more experimentally, costumed in simulated rehearsal clothes. In a newspaper piece that preceded the show's opening, Lewis Nichols notes that the Gielgud/Burton Hamlet is not only

the first in a number of seasons . . . it probably will be the first Broadway production of same in rehearsal clothes ever. Do not jump to conclusions. This is not to be a usual off-beat "Hamlet" in modern dress, with the Prince and gravediggers sipping martinis from Yorick's skull. Both director and star have no use for cocktails in "Hamlet." Their aim only is that full attention be given to the words, not the trappings of the play, and inasmuch as the director is Sir John Gielgud and the star Richard Burton, the intention has a certain authority.

As Nichols's words suggest, the aesthetic was novel, but simultaneously rather conservative, in that it prioritized a return of attention to language, to the assumed core of the play and of drama itself, and away from distracting "trappings." In the same article, Burton says "he always wanted to do Hamlet in as stark a fashion as possible,"<sup>5</sup> and Gielgud expresses some dissatisfaction with the lavish sets and costumes then apparently in vogue for British productions of Shakespeare, and opposes that visual display to an emphasis on central concerns like text, language, and character:

I had the idea two or three years ago in England. Over there a taste for pageantry in Shakespeare has come back--there's a tendency to put on a lot more than before. I thought it was important to get back to the emphasis on

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<sup>5</sup> To which Gielgud replied, according to the article, "Oh, he doesn't like wearing Elizabethan clothes."

words and character. Many modern productions have given more things to see than people can take in. What we are trying to do is a bit of the opposite."

Gielgud's desire to eschew the spectacular pageantry with which Shakespeare had become associated in favor of attention to language reads as an attempt to get back to basics, to prioritize what he sees as the conventional fundamentals of theater. In this regard, though production may have been innovative in its strategies, its aims seem rather conservative. Rather than attempting to explode or adjust what an audience expects from the theater, Gielgud and the company under his direction attempted to deliver the thing itself, distilled, in classic form. No intervention or interruption happens in this *Hamlet* at a structural level; though it is styled in a way that rendered the piece's aesthetic remarkable to critics, the conventions of dramatic theater are left quite intact. Moreover, the specific avoidance of anything like spectacle in favor of ostensibly more worthy objects prioritizes "words and character" specifically by opposing them to visual display or high concept--suggesting that these interventions are mere distractions, lesser and potentially troublesome decorations that detract from, rather than create, good Shakespeare. In attempting to give an audience the vital core of the play laid bare, Gielgud not only emphasizes but locates and defines (or at least reifies) theater's essential elements. His intimation that visual richness or excess would take focus away from the play's classical language and the virtuosity of the production's performers

(a group including the noted classical actors Burton and John Cullum, among others) reflects a prioritization of pre-modern theatrical elements that might be read as deeply conservative.<sup>6</sup>

### *The “miracle of Electronovision.”*

Not unlike the stage production, the eventual mediatization of this *Hamlet*--the Theatrofilm delivered via the “miracle” of Electronovision--promised a certain innovation of presentation. Here was a process that would not only allow the theatrical experience--“a performance for the ages,” no less--to be shared by a nation, but claimed to make national and public a historically significant moment. The experiment is so referenced in a trailer for the film included with the 1999 DVD release, in which Burton also declares (if with a somewhat tepid affect) “This is the theater of the future, taking shape before your eyes, today, and you will be there, part of this historic first. I hope you will join me . . . as *Hamlet* bursts upon the twentieth century through the miracle of Electronovision.”

However, this mediatized presentation (not unlike Gielgud’s pointedly unmediatized, undecorated stage production) was characterized by producers as preserving, rather than challenging or disturbing, the usual grounds of theater--particularly those which distinguished theater from film, which the Electronovision product could be seen to resemble. Making clear

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<sup>6</sup> In terming these elements “pre-modern,” I do not mean to suggest that the production itself was attempted a pre-modern aesthetic or eschewed modernity. Much in the same way that Philip Auslander has argued that liveness as a vaunted theatrical attribute only comes into play after mediatization becomes prevalent, it seems to me that this focus on Shakespearean language and character, which is achieved pointedly by avoiding the sort of high concept, high-tech, visually rich that is common to intermedial work like the Wooster Group’s later deconstruction of this *Hamlet*, is a reaction against perceived modern or contemporary interference into “timeless” texts. As such, I read a sort of conservative bent into his directorial choices even as the piece may have appeared avant-garde in some respects.

(in an interview also included on the recent DVD release) an effort to separate this “Theatrofilm” from film itself, Burton argued that the shared experience would be a specifically theatrical one, not a cinematic one, despite its being a filmed performance shown in a cinema:

INTERVIEWER: Will we get the immediacy of the live Broadway production of *Hamlet* when this is translated onto Theatrofilm with Electronovision?

BURTON: I think you will. I think you will because the nervousness of the actors—knowing that they can’t go back on it, that this is it for all time, unlike, shall we say, in films where you can if you make a mistake go back and do it again. I think the particular intensity and nerves of this is probably the same kind of thing that excites a real live audience in a real live theatre (*Richard Burton Discusses ‘Electronovision’*).

The interviewer’s use of the verb “translated” is apt; the argument here is that the theatrical production will specifically *not* be transformed, but rather its ontology preserved. The effect of mediatization is to be read as transparent. Elsewhere in the interview, still working to separate his Theatrofilm from the cinema, Burton promises that the recorded version “will be exactly as they shot it in the theatre, there's no cheating of any kind, no trick shots . . . it's actually what you do see in the theater.”

In arguing that this mediatized product is “just like” or “as good as” theater--in effect *remains* theatrical despite its mediatization--Burton implies that it shares in some of theater’s defining characteristics (or at least those that distinguish it from the film that Theatrofilm might seem to be): liveness and contingency. Burton emphasizes that the Electronovision technology will be used to record the play *live*, with no opportunity for alternate takes, and so will preserve the “immediacy” native to theater even in the process of mediatization. (In fact, in the previously cited trailer, Burton practically claims that this recording will provide a more

compelling immediacy than live theater, due to the novelty of its hybridity: “This has never happened before. The immediacy, the sense of being there, is unlike any experience you have ever known.”) Burton’s argument for the mediatized product’s status as “real” theater depends, in fact, on no quarter being given to the filmic process: he is adamant that the acting, in particular, is untouched by technological intervention. In the same interview in which he mentions the actors’ “nerves,” he emphasizes that because the Theatrofilm version of the play will be recorded and produced without significant intervention, it will be subject to the same rules of chance and tests of skill as any individual live performance, in which the actors will be revealed as “adept or inadequate or good or fluffing or being articulate, just as they would if you went to see a production tonight at the Lunt-Fontanne theatre.” Further, he declares that “none of the actors make any concession to this new process” as regards their own performances, that they “don’t tone it down to seem like film actors,” or “play it up” *for* those cameras because they are further away than they would be in a studio.

In actuality, the facts of the production of the mediatized record somewhat contradict Burton’s assertion that watching the filmed record reveals the contingency of the theatrical moment “just as” it would exist in live performance. The Theatrofilm product, while not particularly cinematic, has been roughly edited, and it includes, in addition to some reasonably close-up shots, at least one camera angle (arguably a “trick shot”) that represents a point of view unavailable to the audience.<sup>7</sup> In addition, it offers some protection against the potential for misfire (Burton’s “fluffing”) that attends live performance: though the actors may not have

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<sup>7</sup> As most of the company exits via a set of stairs upstage left at the end of the players’ scene, a reverse camera angle shows them from roughly the perspective of someone standing upstage, facing the audience, a vantage point that no audience member would have.

had the opportunity to give alternate takes of individual moments, there were, according to Sterne,<sup>8</sup> three recorded performances, and so multiple chances to record the best possible iteration of the production (149). Because the end product contains cuts from shot to shot, it cannot be certain whether all the shots are from the same performance, although there is no clear evidence of discontinuity that I can appreciate.

The Electronovision *Hamlet*, then, is less than completely felicitous in its commitment to forswearing filmic interventions in favor of a transparent mediatization of the live theatrical original. The greater point, however, is not the relative truth or falsity of Burton's claim, but its mechanics. In Burton's words, Theatrofilm is, or is as good as, theater because, though it was shot on film, it pointedly refuses to exploit film's strategies, and will instead both capture and deliver the rich potential for variability--also figured as peril, excitement--that live performance promises, even though the product itself is a fairly stable recording. Burton lays the responsibility for safeguarding the theatricality of the filmed record squarely on the actors' shoulders, characterizing the contingency of live theater as, largely, the actors' peril: their "nerves" and "intensity," the possibility that they might err. Burton, in only a few sentences in this televised interview, argues emphatically that a pre-recorded product can have the risk and variability audiences expect from a "live" show.

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<sup>8</sup> Actor Richard L. Sterne surreptitiously recorded audio from the rehearsals (including some private rehearsals with only Burton and Gielgud, during one of which Sterne hid with a briefcase-sized tape recorder under the risers in the rehearsal hall) and transcribed and published the content as *Richard Burton in Hamlet* in 1967. Between the Electronovision recording, Sterne's transcribed audio record of the rehearsals and the cast recording of the play (the text of which sustained additional cutting) made available on LP, the Gielgud *Hamlet* is notable not only for its multiple iterations, but for the multiple records still extant of its creation and performance, and the diversity of media and perspective offered by them.

“Live” recording itself, however, though subject to the peril Burton describes, was not new or particularly innovative in 1964; the use of mass media and temporal liveness were coupled, for example, in early television broadcasting. The Theatrofilm producers employed additional strategies to signal the product’s alignment with theater and to distance it from film: the show was recorded in situ in at the Lunt-Fontanne, during actual performances, rather than removed to a soundstage, preserving for audience consumption something of the environment of the original, and providing a record which did not accommodate additional interventions in terms of lighting and sound, interventions which might have further distanced this mediatized product from the live original (and could potentially render this recording of a stage play indistinguishable from cinema). The piece contained no credits for cast or crew; instead, programs were distributed to its audiences, as they would be in the theater. Though the audiences assembled to watch the Theatrofilm did so in a cinema rather than a Broadway-style theater like the Lunt-Fontanne, the fact that they bought tickets (which themselves resembled Broadway theater tickets, and had assigned seating), left home and gathered together in a public space to experience the work in each other’s company was significant: a *televisual* mediatization of this *Hamlet* was achievable without the innovation of Electronovision, but would have produced a record viewable only on the smaller, in-home screens of television sets, precluding the public, group consumption common to theater.

It was because it offered a product that could be shown in cinemas *and* recorded in situ in the Lunt-Fontanne theater that Electronovision was so remarkable. Previously, the two were rather mutually exclusive: recording in the theater in available light and sound, rather than in a soundstage, was possible using video cameras, but because the resulting record was video, not

film, it could only have been put the uses video was capable of serving at the time--namely, television. A conventional film recording would have been possible, of course, but not within the constraints of space and light available inside the Lunt-Fontanne. Electronovision made use of a kinescope-like process in which fifteen video cameras, smaller than film cameras and capable of working with available light, were placed inside the theater and used to relay moving images to a truck outside. The video monitors showing those images were then filmed, resulting in a 35mm film record of the performance suitable for showing in cinemas, although it was of discernibly lower quality than a native film record. It was the co-incidence of live, in situ recording and a movie-like product not restricted to home television viewing that constituted the "miracle of Electronovision." The performances preserved in an Electronovision Theatrofilm could stay in the theater, and it was this that allowed the technology to bill itself as a revolutionary means of capturing live public events and rendering them into film.

Without accepting at face value Burton's claim that the Electronovision process was entirely transparent--"exactly what you see in the theater"--it is certainly true that it preserved aspects of the stage play that could not previously have been recorded, at least not in a product designed for the cinema, and avoided large scale filmic interventions in lighting, sound, etc. which would effectively turn the actors' performances into film performances. The resulting product was black and white, grainy, with notably low definition, making it appear a less polished product but also effectively marking its difference from film-as-genre, even while it made use of film-as-medium.



Perhaps most importantly, however, in terms of the record's self-definition as other-than-cinema, the producers announced a plan to remove the filmed record from circulation after its run in movie houses, engineering a sort of enforced ephemerality for a product that could have had a longer life in the archive. Burton, in the interview quoted earlier, mentions the public showings and then rather uncertainly adds that afterwards the film "will never, possibly, be shown again" (emphasis mine; Burton seems rather uncertain and noncommittal in the recorded interview). While it remains somewhat mysterious if, or at what point in the process, the commitment to remove the filmed record from circulation was certain,<sup>9</sup> it was removed, if not permanently; it remained largely unavailable to the public for decades until it was released on DVD and VHS in 1997, though a few copies remained in various archives: Rothwell and Melzer cite three library holdings, including the Folger and the Library of Congress, as extant prior to the 1997 release; another print, said to be the source of the DVD/VHS release, remained in Burton's personal collection and was discovered by his widow Sally after his death (70). In any case, the aim of the Electronovision experiment was specifically not to document this Broadway *Hamlet* for the archive, though at least one critic found that such a use might be the best one possible for the Theatrofilm: though Bosley Crowther of the New York Times characterized the Theatrofilm not as excitingly hybrid, but as nothing more

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<sup>5</sup> A 1964 *New York Times* article notes that though prints were to be burned, the negative would remain, and a review in the same paper of the Electronovision product expressed doubt that all prints of the recording would actually be destroyed (Bart "Stage-Film Group", Crowther 46). An unnamed Warner Brothers executive announced in the *Times* on June 27 that the film "will be shown only four times in each theater and then never again in either theaters or on TV," but a July 3 article in the same paper mentions the residual payments the actors are contracted to receive "if the film is televised" (Weiler, Zolotow). What is clear, despite the murkiness of the contractual agreements regarding the longevity of the Electronovision *Hamlet*, is the eventual decision that after the two-day run, the film would not be commercially available or causally accessible--a decision that was later reversed with the release of the recording on VHS and DVD.

than “a straight black-and-white photographed recording of the Shakespeare play . . . a [mere] motion picture of a play on a stage” which failed to compel but might “constitute a record that should be useful to libraries and schools . . . This recording, which Warner Brothers has distributed, merits preserving for posterity, at least” (46). The producers’ attempt to create a film recording as an evanescent object is something of an inversion of the commonly articulated aims of recording for documentary purposes: to preserve, to render the vanishing live eminently repeatable. By providing for (and publicizing) its incipient destruction, producers attempted to secure for their “Theatrofilm” the disappearance through which Phelan argues performance becomes itself (146).<sup>10</sup> The Theatrofilm experiment was an attempt to propagate a specifically *theatrical* experience—a Broadway experience—outside the confines of New York, and potentially outside the social and economic borders of the Broadway-attending class. Sheldon Hall and Stephen Neale note that the limited engagement showings of the Theatrofilm “stood in for an out-of-town tour of the stage production (which had closed the month before), covering a larger number of play dates than any road company could or would” (176).

What emerges from an examination of the various strategies by which the Theatrofilm product attempted to secure for itself the name of theater--or the rough equivalent of theater--is

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth emphasizing that whatever attempts were made to construct this recording as “live,” the recorded performance certainly participated in the “economy of reproduction” from which Phelan argues ephemeral performance is free. In its few public showings in 1964, the *Hamlet* Theatrofilm had earned “a gross rental of \$1,781,000. The total cost of the film, including prints and advertising (which made up the bulk of the expenses, was reported as \$1.1 million” (Hall and Neale 176). Profit was made from the reproduction of these performances (and certainly more of it after the eventual release of the recording on DVD and VHS). Moreover, Burton was a producer of the project, and the language with which he praises the possibilities or innovative potential of Electronovision’s faux-liveness must be received not merely as an artist’s effusive evaluation, but also as an investor’s pitch.

a picture of a process terminally at odds with itself: a process of mediatization that advertises, as its strength, that it is as little like a recording as possible, and bears all the best hallmarks of theater while disposing of the more inconvenient ones. The Theatrofilm, as its name implies, was an attempt to innovate a mediatized theater substitute that, as much as possible, worked to efface the usual conditions of mediatization, and to attach itself to known theatrical bona fides: publicness, liveness, contingency and ephemerality.

The producers' insistence that this innovative technology was a transparent one that does not disturb the liveness, contingency or ephemerality of the original is somewhat disingenuous as well as clearly problematic. There were, arguably, some "cheats" involved in the live recording--some hedges against misfire, at least, in the multiple performances recorded, as well as a few apparently fishy camera angles--and the engineered ephemerality, of course, did not work out precisely as promised. Their claim's greater infelicity, however, is in the notion that a theatrical performance can be mediatized transparently. The camera, here, and the rest of the apparatus that works the transformation—to say nothing of the ideologies at play in the mobilization of the same—are figured, implausibly, as silent partners who do nothing to disturb performance or its reception when they effect its translation to a new medium. In "The Reality Effect"--published in 1964, the same year as the Electronovision recording of Burton's *Hamlet*--Roland Barthes critiques this notion of photography as a silent witness, calling out photography as a technique (among others) "based on the incessant need to authenticate the real," brandishing its "obsessive reference to the 'concrete' . . . like a weapon against meaning" (146). Like the real they authenticate, photographic records are understood not to signify, but to "denote the real exactly," just as Burton argues Electronovision will do. Taking

issue with photographic reproduction's reputation for providing an "immediate witness of 'what was here,'" Barthes points out the ways in which authenticating strategies like photographic records *do* signify: the preserved details, the technical accuracy, in the end, "say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of the real (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified" (148, emphasis in original).

Video, in particular, is frequently called on to do the evidentiary work of "authenticating the real" that Barthes puts into question. The content that comes off a security camera or shows up on a monitor during a medical scan—or for that matter, what appears in an amateur video of a wedding or graduation—is apprehended foremost as a record of what *really* happened, supposedly unclouded by either the artistic styling of cinematic production associated with film or the ravages and bias of unreliable human memory. Electronovision was an early video technology that was billed as just such an "immediate witness of 'what was here,'" with little regard for the ways in which video as a form and the act of recording function to change or even create the reality of what is recorded. In a contemporary moment when digital video has all but supplanted film as a medium for television shows and popular films, the possibilities for making meaning through recording, editing and adjusting video seem clear, and its polyvalent relationship with "the real"--something video has been tasked, depending on context, with both preserving and creating--is particularly apparent; video is no longer the province of mere record-keeping, of bare functionality. Its power to create, disturb, color and warp actual events as well as preserve them--its power to deconstruct--becomes clear as the differing connotations of film (with art and artifice) and video (with artless records of the actual) become less stable.

If the claim for Electronovision's immediacy is automatically suspect since we know video to be a medium, and to have meaning-making capabilities, it should also be suspect since theater itself cannot simply be understood as an im-mediate form. Theater, after all, has always staged itself, and, as I pointed out earlier, Philip Auslander has reminded the field that it is only after the advent and popularization of mediatizing technologies that the idea of theater's "liveness" becomes valuable or noteworthy. If theater now often presents itself as a live and immediate alternative to mediatized performance, it is imperative to remember that contemporary theater is often *performing* liveness more than existing as a pure and immanent example of it. The scholar Greg Giesekam cites Ovid's pronouncement 'ars est celare artem' (it is art to conceal artistry) as support for an understanding of "immediacy [as] actually an *effect* of art, an aspiration rather than a reality is hardly limited to a contemporary perspective (18, emphasis mine). In this sense, claims for Electronovision's liveness are part of a longer theatrical tradition of staging presence itself. If Electronovision unavoidably alters or affects theatrical performance in the act of mediatization, it should also be clear that the "original" performance it mediatizes is itself is a *staging* of immediacy, one that increasingly depends on the hypermediacy of contemporary off-stage lives for its novelty and apparent worth. The Electronovision Theatrofilm can't be "just like" theater since media aren't transparent, but *theater* may not really be just like theater, either, when theater exists as a calculated illusion.

***Electronovision and intermediality.***

The claims of Electronovision--to be a mediatization that intrudes so little on the ontology of the original performance that the result is practically media-free, "just as good as" theater--put it rather at odds with contemporary intermedial performance's overt highlighting of media's effects and possibilities. Scholars of intermedial theater often celebrate its power to destabilize, in Gieseckam's words, the "ideological assumptions which underpin dominant representational conventions" (10). This power is leveraged not by every piece of theater or performance that makes use of media or mediatization--indeed, it might be difficult to locate a work which exists without any--but by those in which,

more extensive interaction between the performers and various media reshapes notions of character and acting, where neither the live material nor the recorded material would make much sense without the other, and where often the interaction between the media substantially modifies how the respective media conventionally function and invites reflection on their nature and methods. (Gieseckam 8)

These performances are not simply "multimedia," to borrow Gieseckam's distinction, but intermedial. Markedly unlike the Electronovision experiment, no attempt is made to efface their use of media; rather, it is foregrounded, presenting the act of mediatization not as one that pollutes or corrupts live performance (at least not pejoratively so), nor as a transparent one (which, say, documents live performance for the archive supposedly without imparting any meaning of its own), but rather as an act that instantiates rich potential in the resulting performance, allowing it to effect the reshaping (and invite the reflecting) that Gieseckam mentions.

Using his criteria, the Electronovision mediatization of the 1964 stage *Hamlet* certainly falls short of being an intermedial work--not that it was ever intended to be such; judging it

according to those criteria would involve a somewhat anachronistic perspective on “media,” a notion and group of technologies which can hardly be said to be the same in Gieseckam’s 2007 as they were in 1964. The Electronovision *Hamlet* should be recognized, however, as an early stab at hybridizing theatre and film (as the “Theatrofilm” in its name implies), which itself was a relatively innovative ambition.

In order to contextualize the Electronovision *Hamlet*, I would like briefly to examine two other mediatized *Hamlets* from 1964. It is less than surprising that there should be multiple such productions from which to choose; 1964 was the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth, making *Hamlet* a popular choice for production. Gielgud, in the same *New York Times* interview with Lewis Nichols in which he describes his rehearsal-clothes production concept as being an attempt to get back to the basics of Shakespeare, mentions that he sees “each *Hamlet* as a mirror of the times;” while Gielgud goes on to reference the contemporary British monarchy’s moves away from pomp and circumstance and toward a more ordinary mode of behavior (even as they preserve, in his words, a certain “mystique”) as the contemporary reality that his production reflects, one might also see each of these 1964 *Hamlets* as “mirror[s] of their times” in terms of their respective relationships with media and mediatization. Examining these relationships as they exist in other 1964 *Hamlets* not only contextualizes their commerce with mediatization but point out the relative potency of Electronovision/Theatrofilm’s innovation.

Joseph Papp’s Public Theater production of *Hamlet*, which ran concurrently in New York with the Broadway production starring Burton (and briefly shared a cast member) was televised without commercial interruption by WCBS, a local affiliate, on June 16, 1964

(Adams 71). The broadcast of the production, which unfortunately suffered a Hamlet (Alfred Ryder) with laryngitis, was described as “less than an artistic success” by *New York Times* reviewer Paul Gardner, who noted that “The outdoor taping was technically smooth, but the recording of a live performance cannot be visually imaginative as one staged for the medium in which it is being presented. To [*sic*] often “Hamlet” was seen from the balcony angle” (“Lonely Hero” 71).<sup>11</sup> The reviewer’s comment, while admittedly a small sample of viewer reaction, gives voice to one of the most clichéd problems surrounding the mediatization of theater, and one of the difficulties with which early mediatized stage productions struggled with most visibly: that while recordings of stage plays may make unsatisfying movies or TV programs, neither do they successfully preserve the impact of the live productions, and so they tend to fail as both plays and films/television events, a known difficulty on which the Electronovision Theatrofilm tried to improve by engineering a more effectively hybrid product. The above reviewer seems, even, to oppose, subtly, the technical smoothness of the mediatization with the “imaginative” nature of theater, aligning recording technologies with a cool perfection and theater with a vitality that is seems flexible, creative and spontaneous by comparison, and which cannot be adequately captured by cameras and microphones. A commonplace belief in an auratic presence or value inhering in live theater that dissipates upon recording was also something with which Burton’s Theatrofilm would have to contend. That it did so not by interrogating the commonplace, but by insisting that any such aura was not attenuated due to the situation of the recording, is perhaps unsatisfying from a contemporary

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<sup>11</sup> Rothwell and Melzer call the resulting telecast “exceptionally lengthy” and note that a full page ad in the *New York Times* attested to the “seriousness of the occasion” of its broadcast, potentially also a gesture toward claiming theatrical (high culture) status for a popular-media version of the play (72).



critical perspective, but the attempt to innovate a response to the challenge of integrating media and theater remains notable.

1964 also saw the television broadcast of *Hamlet at Elsinore*, a made-for-television BBC production broadcast in the United States some months after its British premiere (Rothwell and Melzer 71). The production, done in cooperation with Danish television, was staged and recorded on location at the castle at Elsinore, in Denmark, in what Kenneth S. Rothwell and Annabelle Henkin Melzer call “a kind of semi-documentary form.” In contrast to the Public Theater telecast, in this case developing recording technologies attempt more than making a live performance available for wider, repeatable consumption. This production makes use of evolving recording technologies in order to set the production at the actual castle in Elsinore, creating a product that could never have existed as a conventional stage play. The result features some outdoor shots that appear somewhat rough and tumble (shaky camera, less-than-perfect sound--this is what I understand “semi-documentary” to mean) in comparison to theatrical or soundstage versions, but rather than degrade the film’s quality, those artifacts of the recording process seem to guarantee its verité, serving as markers of its special location filming (Rothwell and Melzer 72). This work represents a more innovative, integrated use of mediatizing technology than does the Central Park *Hamlet*, though still not intermedial in the sense communicated by Gieseckam. Still, though, the use of media in *Hamlet at Elsinore* is integral to the product rather than a value-added afterthought. The BBC production, despite its lack of any gesture toward liveness specifically, seems to have been a more popularly successful meeting of theatre and media, possibly because it leveraged mediatizing technology for more a more interesting aim than mere transparent documentation of the live; Paul Gardner

of the *New York Times*, the same reviewer who found the CBS broadcast of the Public Theatre's *Hamlet* lacking, called *Hamlet at Elsinore* "inventive TV theater" ("Bard's Play" X17).<sup>12</sup>

The Theatrofilm presented by Burton and the other producers was arguably more ambitious than these other mediatized *Hamlets* circa 1964 in terms of its desire to merge theater and media into a hybrid form, capable of simultaneously using media and preserving some of the signs and marks that identify theater as such. The producers' efforts to preserve some of theater's theater-ness, through the strategies previously described, read on one hand as a desire to efface the necessarily meaningful effects of mediatization, but might also be read as a desire to integrate live performance and mediatized entertainments rather than to entirely subsume the latter to the former. However problematic or infelicitous the producers' marketing may have been in its assertion that Electronovision served up "a 'live' Broadway hit in your own motion picture theater,"<sup>13</sup> when compared to other experiments in mediatizing *Hamlet*, Theatrofilm stands as a relatively daring attempt at merging the supposedly opposed technologies of mediatization and live performance. Despite the way the producers' rhetoric claims a dubious, suspect effacement of the mediatizing process, implicit in the design of the Theatrofilm experiment, complete with its theater-style programs, public gathering, and enforced evanescence, is the notion that theater and film could be productively combined,

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<sup>12</sup> It is also possible, of course, that this critical approbation had to do with the production offering access to highly regarded and geographically distant British actors adept with classical texts, giving it a high-culture imprimatur that outshone even the classical theater bona fides of The Public Theater's production.

<sup>13</sup> This line is given, in the trailer, via voiceover, while a visual title uses scare quotes to echo the message "A 'live' Broadway Hit!"

hybridized, rather than simply employing recording technologies to remediate theater. In the same claims in which producers attempted to efface the mediatization of the resulting product, they also enthusiastically emphasized the novelty and uniqueness of the Electronovision technology, which stood as innovative precisely because it was capable of a closer integration of mediatization and live stage work, one that could harness media without abjuring theatricality (in the way simpler remediations like the Central Park *Hamlet* broadcast seemed to). Though producers' overwhelming emphasis on the alleged transparency of the Theatrofilm's mediatization and the conservation of theater's supposedly constitutive liveness remains awkward, the experience itself was a remarkable, if imperfect (or even, from contemporary perspectives, clumsy), innovation in--or at least pursuit of--hybridity. The Theatrofilm form does not foreground the media it employs in the way contemporary intermedial theater does, according to definitions like Gieseckam's, but it *did* modify the conventional (at the time) function of the media involved (by engineering a planned evanescence for the mediatized record, or even just by attempting to coerce it into a partnership with theater), and in so doing, succeeds in inviting, if someone subtextually, reflection on the "nature and methods" of those media, per Gieseckam's definition. In that sense, the Electronovision Theatrofilm can be seen as a forerunner of contemporary intermedial performance in away other attempts at mediatization were not. Though there some problematic contradiction remains between the unmistakable, even spectacular mediatization that created the product itself and the multifarious strategies levied to engineer some claim it as live (and therefore theater), that very tension points to some of what intermedial theater supposedly leads audiences to reconsider: the possibilities for deep imbrication of media with theatrical

performance, in which the two are figured less as adversaries which might pollute or invalidate each other than as collaborators, if at times uneasy, competitive or antagonistic ones.

### ***The Wooster Group Hamlet***

The Wooster Group's 2007 resolutely intermedial *Hamlet* used the Electronovision Theatrofilm as source material (although not particularly consistently or sincerely), combining live performers with the mediatized performances of Gielgud's cast. The record of the stage performance is overtly tampered with in their production: figures are "disappeared" from scenes, wholly or partially; the recording has been altered in places to affect the meter of the lines (according to the program notes from the Public Theater production, to restore "the original poetic meter" of the verse, which was "spoken freely in the 1964 production"), resulting in stutters and pauses; and the video is fast-forwarded, paused, and reversed during the performance, sometimes at the explicit behest of onstage performers, making the audience's access to it explicitly manipulated and partial. The recording is also interrupted by snippets of video from other sources, or removed from the screen altogether, resulting in a somewhat alarming blue screen reading, "no signal." In their hands, the "real" Broadway experience promised by the Electronovision recording is deconstructed in a display that the journalist Jane Kramer called, in a profile of director Elizabeth LeCompte, "a virtual downloading of the film."

In the loosest terms, the performance is based around a re-creation of the mediatized record of the stage play. The program notes describe the production of the Electronovision Theatrofilm, and then assert

Our Hamlet attempts to reverse the process, reconstructing hypothetical theatre piece from the fragmentary evidence of the edited film, like an archeologist inferring a temple from a collection of ruins. Channeling the ghost of the legendary 1964 performance, we descend into a kind of madness, intentionally replacing our spirit with the spirit of another.

The altered video record is projected against a large upstage screen, and the few set elements that appear in the recorded stage production are echoed on the Wooster Group's stage: a platform, a table, a chair. At times, the mimicry of the recording is impressive (as in the mastery with which the actors, particularly Scott Shepherd as Burton's Hamlet, mimic line readings and gestures), at times it is amusing or tongue-in-cheek (as when the actors trundle the table and chair closer together, then further apart in an effort to match the stage furniture's placement to zooming or widening camera angles), and at times it falls away altogether (there are musical breaks where the performer playing Laertes, Casey Spooner of the music and performance group Fischerspooner, delivers some of his lines in electro-pop song; the lead player's Priam speech is dispatched by a projected recording of Charlton Heston's performance in Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* film).

The Wooster Group production, unsurprisingly, exhibits an intermediality that the Theatrofilm, even with its attempts at a novel hybridity, did not. Mediatization, here, is never effaced, but continuously highlighted. In a sense, the Wooster Group's work re-presents the Electronovision film not unlike the film re-presents the Broadway play, though the Group's performance makes its intervention more explicit, but the Wooster Group's *Hamlet* is not merely a more invasive re-mediatization of source material. In fact, the Group is arguably reversing the vector of the mediatizing process (playfully, partially) as it stages the Electronovision recording using live actors, restoring a filmed record of the live into putative

liveness. Their *Hamlet*, however, does not prize or foreground liveness (not even the partial liveness its live actors might warrant, or the argued-for like-liveness of the Electronovision recording) but rather exploits the potential of intermedial theater to occasion a re-thinking of mediatization and liveness that dismantles an easy opposition between the two in favor of a productive interplay. In contradiction to Burton's Theatrofilm, the Wooster Group *Hamlet* openly depends on and celebrates its use of media *as* performance, rather than downplaying its effect on the theatrical product. The Group's work (and, clearly, not just in *Hamlet*) emphatically does not fear, but rather experiments with, the potential for mediatization to complicate theater's ontology, in the process destabilizing a pat opposition between live performance and mediated documentation. In fact, in the course of the Wooster Group's *Hamlet*, recorded video is specifically highlighted as contingent rather than stable, documentary and evidentiary, while live action is performed not as a spontaneous and vulnerable creative event but as an iterative practice made up of acts of nearly mechanical reproduction.

The previously mentioned interventions into the source recording are visible and/or audible to the audience; no artifice or subterfuge has been employed to make those manipulations appear seamless. Instead, the performance lays bare the vulnerability of video to alteration, manipulation and degradation. While the projected video is perhaps the most spectacularly manipulated record, the audio from the recordings is also mixed with the amplification of the live performers' voices, and the mix is dynamically altered as the action proceeds: in certain speeches and moments, the recorded voices from the 1964 actors dominates; in others it is Kate Valk's or Ari Fliakos's or Scott Shepherd's voice that dominates

the mix.<sup>14</sup> More interestingly, at times the proportion is unclear and the audience member hears a voice that is neither embodied nor entirely inorganic, but an unfixable cyborg-like mixture of the two.

Video here, and the recorded audio that accompanies it, works not as the authentic reproduction of the live it is often taken for, but as a medium with variable applications; as Sean Cubitt writes, video is not only a medium for recording, but also, necessarily, “a medium for erasing” (147). Cubitt’s maxim seems particularly apropos in the moments in which specific on-screen figures or rhythms of speech have been erased, but applies in a larger sense, as well. Though the extant Theatrofilm might seem to ensure Burton’s legacy by safeguarding a record of his performance, in the course of the Wooster Group production, that same video record is used to distort Burton’s performance nearly to the point of erasure: over the course of the Group’s *Hamlet* Burton’s performance is fractured, hybridized, polluted, shared across bodies, edited, partially enlivened, attenuated and re-contextualized. The obvious manipulation of the source recording exploits--and explicitly presents--digital technologies’ affinity for easy and potentially undetectable alteration of (natively digital or digitized) material, which in turn exposes the vulnerability of documentation when it comes to preserving performance: not only might a video record fail to account completely for the live moment and its presumed aura, the record it does provide is itself subject to ravages, mischief, and manipulation. What is staged in the Wooster Group *Hamlet* is not video’s enduring stability, easily opposed to the live

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<sup>14</sup> Kate Valk’s voice is also subjected to an audio effect when she plays Ophelia that increases its pitch and emphasizes the sing-song tone Valk uses to impersonate Linda Marsh’s delivery from the recording. The adjustment serves both to mock, lightly, the girlish quality of Marsh’s portrayal and to differentiate Valk’s performance as Marsh’s Ophelia from her performance as Eileen Herlie’s Gertrude.

moment's capriciousness and ephemerality, but a polyvalent relationship between the ephemerality of live action and the mediatizations sometimes mobilized to document it: the video that preserves can clearly also, even simultaneously, distort. The media and digital technologies employed in the Wooster Group production take a star turn, not only performing their actions but showing off their capabilities. They make manifest their contingency and contrariness, providing access to Burton's performance at the same time that that performance is mutated, corrupted, re-surfaced and productively mis-represented. Clearly, the performance of video itself is as necessary to this work as the embodied performances it records, and the live performers who re-present them.

If the work occasions a rethinking about the nature of video as a medium, it provokes a rethinking of live performance as well--Gieseckam's suggestion that intermedial art is poised to prompt "reflection on [different media's] nature and methods" must imply a concomitant rethinking of media's other, the "live" that it replaces, making this piece just as provocative of reflection on the "nature and methods"--the characteristics, the value--of *liveness* (8). Live performance is understood as unpredictable, vulnerable to misfire and open to spontaneity; if these adjectives do not entirely account for its "nature," they at least highlight its perceived difference from film, video and other types of recordings (which, despite their necessary vulnerability, are often perceived as stable, invariable and nearly infinitely iterable). Burton himself emphasizes, in the interview about *Electronovision* that accompanies the *Hamlet* on DVD, the overwhelming vulnerability of live performance--which, in Burton's logic, results in the theatrical actor's "nerves" and "intensity," which themselves are specially valuable



qualities of live acting that a live and present audience can enjoy, qualities unavailable to audiences of a painstakingly produced film. David Zucker Saltz writes that

The value of live theatre, especially in a mediatized age, lies precisely in its variability. Regardless of how rigorously scripts and the rehearsal process constrain performances, each performance within those constraints is a unique event. The rigorous structure of performance traditions such as Noh, which prescribes the actor's every gesture, serves merely to amplify the significance of the most minute variations. The thrill of the live is to see a performance event unfold, with all the risk that entails.

If perfectly precise iterability and the absence of risk were the “ultimate ideals” of performance, Saltz argues, “the art form should have ceded to recorded media such as film and video long ago” (109). Peril and vulnerability are thus marked by Saltz and Burton alike as desirable, valuable--a thrill.

Philip Auslander references a somewhat similar, although less nuanced (at least in Auslander’s characterization) argument made by the film critic Noel Carroll, who argues for the consideration of individual theatrical performances as works of art in a way that individual showings of a film are not, largely because the former are, individually, works of interpretation rich with opportunities for meaningful difference while the “performance of a film” is static, determined, “generated directly from a template” (qtd in *Liveness* 48-49). While Saltz is careful to characterize *variation*, specifically (as opposed a less sophisticated “magic of the live” or valorized potential for “organic,” spontaneous creative interpretation), as the sine qua non of theater, his argument coincides with both Burton and Carroll in its identification of theater’s undeterminedness, its potential for unpredictable fluctuation, as essential. It is, in this argument, the opportunity for variation that distinguish iterations of theater from iterations of film, and when even the “most minute variations” carry this weight, they must make meaning,

whether they are the spontaneous and idiosyncratic acts of artistic interpretation Carroll suggests, or variations of chance, minor differences, or the mistakes and misfires Nicolas Ridout argues are constitutive of theater. Like Burton, Saltz finds excitement in theater's vulnerability, and (at least somewhat) like Carroll, he locates value in a kind of seemingly artisanal singularity promised by live performance, even if that variance is nothing more (or less) than the artifacts of the imprecision of a live process.

In these arguments, liveness seems to enable a constitutive, congenital imprecision native to theater, sometimes mobilized in the service of creative spontaneity, other times an unavoidable vulnerability to error, chance or the exigencies of context. The identification of that imprecision (or vulnerability, or variability) as what has kept live performance from "ceding" to "recorded media such as film and video" effectively isolates this particular quality as not only a notable attribute of live performance (even when, as Saltz notes, the variation from one performance to another is "most minute"), but its defining attribute and the seat of its value. I should note that Saltz argues that interactive technologies can themselves specifically allow for variability within performances, and so does not oppose live variability to the employment of digital and other technologies per se, but only to the "older, purportedly non-interactive media which I term linear media" (107-8). Rather, Saltz opposes live performance's

openness to variation to pre-recorded performances, delivered through “linear” media, that seem not to allow for interactive response.<sup>15</sup>

The variability that Saltz describes can also be figured as vulnerability: the actor’s peril, the risk of an unpredictable live moment. While Saltz’s opposition makes sense in a context in which the advent of mass media has created liveness as an other, Nicholas Ridout points out that theater has *always* been vulnerable to misfire and failure, making failure (or its risk) constitutive of theater even before the advent of mass media constituted the (vulnerable, variable) live as a category. In Ridout’s view, theater constantly enacts its own failure to instantiate illusion completely; he writes that “Theater’s failure, when theater fails, is not anomalous, but somehow, perhaps, constitutive” (3). The “failure” might be an actor or technician’s mishap, goof, or gaffe during performance, but also, in Ridout’s argument, the constitutive failure can be the constant threat of theater’s potential to fail to engage, convince, entertain or even sufficiently distract its audience--its inescapable failure to “master the techniques of perfect representation” (32). This failure may be particularly visible when opposed to technologies (like video) which seem to offer more “perfect” representation, but it also pre-dates their arrival. Moreover, Ridout holds that theater’s inevitable failure may be its most important aspect: “the apparently marginal or unwanted events of the theatrical encounter that will turn out, of course, to be somehow vital to it: stage fright; embarrassment; animals;

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<sup>15</sup> Here I risk oversimplifying Saltz’s stance; in the article I reference he defines interactive and linear media, respectively, quite specifically as they concern his argument, which holds that though the latter eviscerates theater’s essential openness to variation, the former can emphasize and respond to it. While the distinctions he outlines between the two types of media are difficult to synopsise here, it is worth mentioning that it is the agility with which media can respond to live performance (for example, the ability of media to “adapt to variations in the rhythms or dynamics of [an] actor’s delivery”) that identify them, in Saltz’s view, as interactive in a way aligned with the spontaneity of theatrical performance rather than against it (109).

the giggles; failure in general” (14). The failure of which Ridout writes is reminiscent of the peril and vulnerability described by Burton, and also, somewhat, of the variability prized by Saltz. I wish to repeat, however, that such susceptibility certainly predates the historical moment when film and other recorded media became the specific other of live performance, making vulnerability a constitutive ingredient of theater that is not reliant on a mediatized other or its supposed stable perfection.

This vital predisposition toward failure is theater’s rich potential for variation differently writ; both are based in a substrate of unpredictability, spontaneity and danger that seem to place theater at odds with supposedly stable mediatized renderings. The contemporary ubiquity of mediatized performances certainly throw the comparatively radical opportunity for variability promised by live performance into sharp relief. However, as I have argued, that opposition is troubled when film and video recordings expose themselves as vulnerable and variable, even if they continue to lack the highly visible contingency of live performance. Mediatized records are subject to misfire in delivery and interruption in their reception as well as vulnerable to “format death” or hardware scarcity (8-track tapes, for example, are relatively difficult to locate, produce or play) and to minute changes as some media--like magnetic tape--degrade. (If these changes seem negligible, I would note that the minute changes highlighted as meaningful in Saltz’s Noh example, might also strike some spectators as insubstantial.) Popular regard for any particular medium or technology is also changeable and unstable, changing the way that medium is perceived, and in turn the way it signifies. A contemporary perspective almost undoubtedly reads the 1964 Electronovision product as dated, if not antiquated, its quality startlingly low and its name now rather endearingly mid-century. No

longer legible as a “miracle,” it marked by a historical context that adds different shades of meaning to what was once was heralded as a revolutionary technology. Even without taking any degradation of the print into consideration, the video itself undeniably *means* differently in the context of a 2007 intermedial work than it did in the movie houses of 1964.

I should note that there are alternatives, of course, to thinking of failure or vulnerability to variation as the sine qua non of theater. In answer to Carroll, Auslander quite rightly points out instances in which live performances are not individual interpretations so much as widely distributed iterations of a single interpretation, especially those which are licensed and franchised and so manage to exist quite literally within the economy of reproduction Peggy Phelan argues that live performance resists. By way of example, Auslander cites franchised productions of live, interactive theatrical shows like *Tony ‘N’ Tina’s Wedding*, which depend on licensed characterizations and premises, although the shows themselves are improvised around a central scenario and therefore certainly vary from evening to evening as well as from cast to cast. He also cites individual performances of the McDonalds corporation’s Ronald McDonald character, writing that “It is precisely the point of these performances that they all represent a single, standardized Ronald . . . If a child were led to make judgements concerning the interpretive quality of the various Ronald McDonalds s/he had seen--such as: “I liked the Ronald at that restaurant in Cleveland better” or “This guy did Ronald better when we were here yesterday”--then the performances would have been dismal failures” (*Liveness* 50).

Auslander here does not argue that live performances are unvarying or invulnerable, but that even in their admitted contingency they may not be, at least not first and foremost, the interpretive acts that Carroll describes. Broadway shows themselves, after all, better resemble

iterations of a previously rehearsed interpretation than they do spontaneous original interpretations; while they certainly are vulnerable to misfire, and feature at least the sort of subtle differences that Saltz finds valuable in highly constrained forms, the “interpretation” of the text is usually the highly curatorial work of a director--sometimes previously “vetted” by an audience in another location, as in out-of-town tryouts--and considerable resources are devoted to the production of a consistent, and consistently salable, product. The minute variations celebrated by Saltz in highly “constrained” Noh performances, in fact, may be the least of what is valued or perceived in commercial Broadway work (just as they are probably the least valuable part of the various Ronald McDonald performances referenced by Auslander). I find more that is compelling in the risk and peril Saltz references, sounding something like Burton when the latter highlights the possibility for “fluffing”: “The thrill of the live is to see a performance event unfold, with all the *risk* that entails” (109, emphasis added). This focus on risk seems exactly right to me; the chance that something will go spectacularly awry, in the sense celebrated by Ridout--that an actor will break character in a fit of unsanctioned laughter, or a fencing foil sail into the audience--is where a large part of the excitement of the live inheres, at least in the context of regional and commercial theater that is carefully rehearsed and refined and specifically designed to offer a consistent experience. Although the shades of meaning implied by the subtle variations Saltz mentions may indeed shift as an audience sees, for example, a Broadway show unfold in a seemingly unprotected live moment, an audience almost never sees an interpretation spontaneously *invented* there.

The Wooster Group's work, particularly in *Hamlet*, can be read to suggest a more difficult relationship between liveness and variability than the one celebrated by Burton, and Carroll, one that does not require variability and contingency to serve as the special province and particular value of the live or of theater. Liveness's association with variability/contingency/vulnerability is troubled in this intermedial work, in a way that provokes a rethinking of the "methods and nature" of *liveness* that I mentioned earlier as the necessary flip side of Gieseckam's argument regarding the potential of intermedial work to occasion a denaturalizing and reassessment of media. This *Hamlet*, after all, presents live actors taking as their task the imitation of non-live-ness, effectively denaturalizing the live as simple or artless. In a sense, these embodied performers function as the type of projection Carroll suggests is not interpretive, and therefore not *really* art: they function specifically and primarily, if not solely or perfectly, to iterate a previous artistic interpretive act, which is all the more "canned" for being that of another group in another decade. In their copying of the source video, the company works like a living projector, a mere vessel for previous artistic interpretation which Carroll's logic cannot see as art--in fact, Jane Kramer described the source video as "an edited 'Burton *template*,'" the same word Carroll uses to distinguish mere iteration from a fresh presentation of art (emphasis mine). The work derived from this "template" resembles something like an organic video feed, although it may lack the precision of actual video, and the performance process works under a mandate similar to the Electronovision process: to reproduce transparently, to efface its mediation, the distance between source and copy. Live performance--and more specifically, acting--is suggested here not as an excitingly variable

practice but as one which compels when its attempt to replicate exactly, in the manner of mechanical or digital reproduction, achieves virtuosity.

This replication is not unique to the Group's *Hamlet*, of course, but is a technique employed often in the Wooster Group's body of work. Ron Vawter described the practice that gave him the necessary facility with Clifton Fadiman's performance in words that emphasize its technical, nearly mechanical nature:

Fadiman makes these very unwieldy and awkward gestures. Willem and I studied them very carefully, second by second. When i look at my eyes in the tape [of the resulting Wooster Group performance], I'm amazed at how glazed over they look. I had done unconscious listening, putting on the audio tape when I was asleep. It's as if performing it reinduced the sleep state I was in while I was digesting it (Savran 15).

Vawter's "glazed over" eyes and his careful imitative attention to detail emphasize that performance here is not about inspiration or interpretation but rather about the precision of reproduction; he reveals his process as one of copy-making.

David Saltz quite rightly points out the minute variation inevitably remaining even within performances that are overwhelmingly constrained by scriptedness, rehearsal or convention; my argument is not that Shepherd or any other highly skilled actor is capable of perfectly re-iterating any performance. However, given that recording technologies and their products are *also* exposed as variable/vulnerable/imperfect in the Wooster Group production, Shepherd's work issues a particular challenge to the notion of variability as the special nature or value of live performance, especially when it comes to the work of actors. Set against a vulnerable, varying video record that fails to iterate perfectly, Shepherd's performance is surprisingly exacting when called up on to reproduce Burton's performance. Shepherd gives a performance that can be celebrated less for its variation than for the masterful, though



imperfect, precision of its iteration. The task of embodying the projected Burton highlights not creative interpretation, the work commonly ascribed to actors, but a commitment to replication--a job often relegated to machines or associated with digital technology, the antithesis of artistic spontaneity.

It is certainly possible that some of the pleasure of watching Shepherd also comes from the vulnerability of his liveness--his splendid mimicry, after all, could derail--but in a production in which Shepherd casually acknowledges and directs, from the stage, the technical actions of the performance (such as when he casually directs technicians to start the show by saying, rather offhandedly, "Roll that tape," or when he jokingly directs the company to "skip this part" when they encounter a scene involving both Gertrude and Ophelia, as both are played by Kate Valk in different wigs), the excitement of a possible stumble is less potent. In the Wooster Group's non-illusory, non-representative work, the sense of peril that Ridout and Burton both cite as a vital part of theatrical performance seems far less loaded. If there is no illusion to rupture, the prospect of temporarily losing one's place or dropping a prop is not charged with the same peril. In fact, neither a consistently perfect, practiced iteration nor spontaneous creative choice is required for the impact of his performance: it is the *moments* in which his mimicry is outstanding that compel, not the inviolate picture of a perfect whole or a volatile, of-the-moment interpretation. Shepherd's temporally live performance may be vulnerable to misfire, but unlike the theater described by Carroll and Burton, it is not--or not primarily--that potential for variance and interruption that makes it special or valuable. Rather, it is the extent to which Shepherd's performance features a live performer adopting the

function often deputed to mediatizing technologies that makes it remarkable: the making of an exacting copy.

***Copy-making, re-presentation and mimicry.***

Though their work is not representational theater per se, the Wooster Group often uses a re-presenting technique, sometimes labeled “reconstruction” (Callens 2; LeCompte qtd in Savran, *Breaking* 14), to make their material, as in Vawter’s presentation of Clifton Fadiman. David Savran describes the re-presented or reconstructed material as a type of “found object,” from which “All of the Wooster Group pieces” proceed, and categorizes them into five orders, three of which seem to apply to the Electronovision recording:

[F]irst, recordings of private interviews or public events [like to Spalding Gray’s interviews with his family for *Rumstick Road*, or the excerpts from the Liddy/Leary debate in *L.S.D.*]; second, previously written dramatic material, ‘classic’ works such as *Our Town* . . . third, prerecorded sound, music, film and video . . .” (*Breaking* 51).

However, for a piece of text, video or audio to be a useful “found object” for LeCompte and the Group’s work, that object has to “[come] onto the scene without fixed meaning,” possessed of a flexibility that keeps it from reliably signifying only one way. These multifarious objects are exploitable by LeCompte’s collage process as she sets them against various other objects, resulting in an “interwoven network of objects . . . a text, within which the component object is newly produced (or re-produced), the result of active process, fabrication, work.” The object is produced again, necessarily re-contextualized, but, as Savran writes, it retains some of its lack of fixity “by virtue of its *dislocation* within the text” (*Breaking* 51, emphasis in original). This “arbitrary nature,” the quality that allows the object to work in

conjunction or against the other constituent objects, cannot be found in objects that carry overwhelming meaning or signification; LeCompte describes trying to use the Zapruder film in the Group's *Nyatt School*, but finding the infamous fragment not productively exploitable due to its heavy baggage: "It's too loaded. I know too unambiguously what it is for me. So it becomes boring very quickly . . . We abstracted [it] and took away its recognizability, but it lost its potency. And when we played it straight and everyone knew what it was, I hated it . . . It couldn't take on any more meaning" (Savran 218).

Component objects the Group has used in a similar way to their use of the Electronovision recording include Mario Bava's 1965 cult movie *Terrore nello spazio* in *La Didone* (in which the film and Francesco Cavalli's opera, *La Didone*, "collide in a war-like symbiosis") the "1965 Encyclopedia Britannica teaching film" ("Our Town and Our Universe"), featuring Fadiman, which the group "reconstructs" [LeCompte's word] for *Route 1 & 9* (*La Didone*; *Breaking* 14). Here, Savran describes the Group's use of the film, itself a lecture on Thornton Wilder's play that must have read as dated and corny even when that work premiered:

The first part of *Route 1 & 9*, "The Lesson: In Which a Man Delivers a Lecture," is a videotaped lecture on Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* delivered by Ron Vawter and screened in the upstairs space at the Performing Garage. In the Wooster Group version, "The Lesson" appears to be a gentle mockery of the banalities of humanistic criticism. For the duration of the tape, the camera holds long static shots of the lecturer and pans portentously as he moves back and forth between a tiny model stage and the ladder to be used in *Our Town* (and *Route 1 & 9*). It zooms in for important 'truths' and underscores them by spelling out the catch phrases across the bottom of the television screen. These production devices, combined with jump cuts in the editing (most of which were present in the print from which the Wooster Group worked), suggest that a subtly critical point of view is being taken toward both the speaker and his analysis of *Our Town*" (*Breaking* 15).

In an interview Savran recounts in *Breaking The Rules*, LeCompte mentions “liking” the original Fadiman video, and simultaneously being “bothered” by liking it, since it evoked a troublingly comforting nostalgia. The media object was of interest to her, and useable for her work, because it “pressed two buttons simultaneously. And I found myself unable to accept either in comfort. I couldn’t destroy it and I couldn’t go with it and be satisfied. I wanted to dig more deeply into it” (17).

LeCompte’s reaction to the Fadiman video is a little like my own reaction to the Burton/Gielgud *Hamlet* the Group deconstructs: I have a somewhat nostalgic affection for Burton’s lovely voice, for the classical text I was taught, as an actor, to revere, especially when it is being handled ably by well-trained actors; I even have a fondness for the Electronovision project itself, which, for all its troubles, struggles to use media to serve rather than to supplant theater, to exploit the potential of both and innovate a new form, however dowdy “TheatroFilm” must seem now. That affection shares space with concern for the the project’s fetishizing of liveness and a discomfort with the way Burton’s lovely sound and accompanying performance has been characterized, even enshrined, as the product of a “natural” actor powered by an exceptional, essential, passionate interiority--the “real” ability of the “real” Burton.

### ***The “natural” Burton and discourses of acting***

Biographers and critics chronicling and analyzing Burton’s work repeatedly attest that his work on stage is particularly dependent, and never separable from, his person: his particularities and characteristics, his “presence” and charisma, his ethnicity, his

intellectualism. The biographer Melvin Bragg actually grounds his explanation for the classical actor's early film failures in his personality, arguing that Burton was at the mercy of his own personality's stony recalcitrance (here figured in ethnic/nationalist terms) even as he reaped the benefits of his charisma:

Burton's problem was different from Olivier's [Olivier and Burton shared a difficulty translating their stage acting to the camera] because for some reason, on the set . . . he *seemed* fine: he *looked* fine--a natural: **it was the inward, personal Burton, the thing he was**, that Welsh reserve which held out distrustfully against the camera like a man of iron will--power against a hypnotist. He would not go under. **He would always be himself.** He had to find a script which would allow him--as Shakespeare allowed him, as Christopher Fry and Lillian Hellman had allowed him--to be himself and be the part at one and the same time. Then he would make it work (109, italics in original, boldface emphasis added).

The idea of Burton's work relying on an essential self is also suggested by repeated pronouncements, like the one above, of his "natural" ability, unschooled by devotion to any study of craft (a common refrain, despite Burton's long and intimate tutelage under the director and actor Philip Burton, his foster father). Peter Stead, another Burton biographer, writes that Binkie Beaumont, a British theatrical manager and producer, "confirm[ed] he [Burton] was an actor who was confident that he had nothing to learn and that to attempt to submit talent to experiment and routine was to risk losing it" (25). His unconcern with consistency and his lack of regard or desire for formal training affirmed the romantic notion that he was a "natural," possessed of an authentic self that was all that was necessary for the generation of compelling performance: The actor John Neville told Bragg that "[Burton] was a *wonderful* actor. Sometimes it was amazing. He would just walk on the stage and there would be a 'presence', an aura . . . . [H]e was lazy, though: didn't have to work at it, bored" (106, italics in original).

Stead sees a link between Burton's relative lack of training and his "personality" and "instincts":

His intelligence and physical robustness would see him through a part but nothing that had happened to Richard Burton for one moment suggested that he owed his success to any body of thought or corporate effort. He had arrived as a personality and not as a trainee actor and in almost everything they said the favorable critics were really confirming his own instincts. (25)

And from Bragg:

What he relied on, I think, and what he always came back to was that '*natural*' self which he did not understand nor at this stage want to understand, but which somehow gave him his power. . . . In this sense, Burton was drawing on something profound and perhaps dangerous in himself. (77, emphasis added)

Whether or not anything like a "natural" self was available to be revealed in Burton's work, his contemporary and his later biographers critics clearly saw that work as dependent on it, all the more so due to his lack of (and disinterest in) training. Elinor Hughes of the *Boston Herald* wrote of the 1964 *Hamlet*'s Boston tryout that Burton "has poetry and passion in his bones and in his voice," emphasizing both the embodied vitality and the unique personal traits seen to anchor his performance (qtd in "Burton's Hamlet Wins Approval"). Hughes, like the biographers who foreground Burton's "natural" ability, suggests that "poetry and passion" existed *inside* Burton, as fundamental and as organic as his skeleton.

Even if characterizations of Burton's performance as relying on an essential self seem romanticized, his work might be seen as an extension of his "self" if only because (especially in the summer of 1964, during the height of public interest in his titillating affair with and subsequent marriage to Elizabeth Taylor) Burton was possessed of a public persona that could

by no means be divorced from his onstage presence. Bragg writes that Shakespeare allowed Burton to be himself and “the part” at once; his very public romantic situation in 1964 hardly allowed for any kind of Hamlet that did *not* feature Burton’s “self”--his famous, Elizabeth-Taylor-wooing self was on stage every night, ineffaceable and inseparable from the Hamlet he performed. Stead writes that “[T]he critic David Cobb very nicely anticipated what was to occur in a headline that read 'Hamlet all set to star in Richard Burton'" (33). Stead also sees the stripped-down aesthetic that guided Gielgud’s direction of *Hamlet* as further emphasizing the visibility of Burton’s personhood:

The effect of the dark casual sweater [Burton’s “rehearsal wear” costume] was quite stunning . . . [C]ertainly the confrontation was going to be immediate and direct. There was a nakedness about him; nothing would be hidden in this production. Quite memorably Graham Jenkins was to say of his brother's performance that it was a case of watching "Richard Burton playing Richard Burton playing Hamlet." . . . [I]t also reminds us of the way in which a visit to the play was very much an exposure to a star personality who was powerfully revealing his innermost self (33).

Appreciable in Burton's work, then, is not the constant recourse to an internal self that characterizes the conglomeration of practices popularly known as “Method” acting--a practice no historian, biographer or critic associates directly with Burton, especially given his eschewing of formal training--but certainly the constant presence of a public persona that was, however contingent and performative, indivisible from the performing actor and from the performed character, a situation which may have led audiences infatuated with Burton to assume or desire his acting to be dependent on, even revelatory of an inborn, essential self, as Stead has it.

It might be prudent to mention, too, that Burton was considered to draw on his (vital, passionate, Welsh) self in a way not entirely dissimilar from the practices of a Method actor. Burton's biographer Melvin Bragg quotes Noel Coward as remarking that Burton and Taylor both were "'good pros: none of this Method nonsense'" (243). And yet he goes on to describe a dependence on the self, on the actor's identity and biography, that is not fully opposed to "Method nonsense":

Yet in a way Burton and Taylor--good pros though they were on the surface--both drew on themselves and their own lives in ways which would have been immediately recognized by Stanislavski<sup>16</sup> (243).

Burton may not have been practicing a form of realism particularly concerned with psychological "truth" or the authenticity of emotion, but his performance was substantially grounded by the "realness" of Burton's perceived person/ality, not to mention his growing fame and very public, scandalous romantic situation.

To the extent that Richard Burton is, or is understood to be, or *was* understood to be, a "natural," the title has meaning precisely because the thing he does, acting, is so out of the ordinary that it is understood to require either intensive training or a rare, innate ability (or both). Rather like an athlete who has inordinate talent for the specialized activity of a codified sport, someone who is a "natural" on stage or in front of the camera is surprising and valuable precisely because she is able to perform a highly artificial task in a theatrical situation so

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<sup>16</sup> He goes on to note that "This was one of the reasons for the Strasbergs' adoration of Richard," who had had an affair with their daughter Susan (244). Bragg also writes that Burton "would talk at great length to Lee Strasberg about acting--Strasberg was a great admirer of his," and though Burton had to "think [those conversations] through carefully in his own way and stick to what he had intuited for himself," as a result of them, "everything was being explored, pushed" (122-3).



ontologically odd that J.L. Austin famously excluded it from his theories on the speech act as part of the general category of language used “not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its proper use--ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language” (22, emphasis in original). Nicolas Ridout uses Jonas Barish’s evocative phrase “ontological queasiness” to refer to both the bizarre situation of theater--simultaneously real and not real, actually there but not actually what it purports, or pretends to purport, to be--and to the ambivalence with which it is often received by audiences who, by turns and perhaps concomitantly believe, fail to believe, partially believe, and enjoy dis-believing in its illusion (3). An actor who can enter this complex situation of multiple, partial, and failing illusions and deliver a compelling or pleasurable performance that is received as “natural” ability is, in fact, a “natural” at a very unnatural task. If the actor is seen as relying on his essential self for the power of his performance, the uncanniness of the situation deepens, as the indelibility of the actor simultaneously undoes theatrical illusion in the same process in which the actor supposedly relies on his gifted person to create it.

The Wooster Group can, and does, expose the richness and paradox of this situation. Not only does Shepherd achieve the some of the heights of Burton’s performance without being Burton *or* naturalizing the act of imitation, the lack of illusion in Group’s presentation highlights rather than attempts to efface the weirdness of the performance situation, and the many screens and technological effects further distance the presentation from an ideal of “nature.” Since their work does not depend on illusion, there is no skillful misdirection for the performers to master or employ; since they do not transform into characters, there is no artificial and unnatural transformation for them to accomplish with the unschooled ease of a

“natural.” As Philip Auslander has written, there is an “absence of transformation in Wooster Group performance, compared with more traditional modes of acting;” he describes Willem Dafoe insisting “that the Wooster Group does not place the premium on believability demanded by realistic acting, with its implication that the actors are really experiencing the emotions they portray” (*From Acting* 42).

Perhaps more telling (and maybe more obvious) is the fact that Shepherd has clearly learned to act as Burton, and through patently “unnatural” means that seem to make little use of an internal self. Much is made, in the quotations I have borrowed from biographers and critics, of the brilliant performances that Burton seems to accomplish not so much in spite of his lack of training but because of it; to understand his work as the work of a “natural” is to imagine those performances as spontaneously arriving, the work of a sort of naturally-occurring genius that cannot be artificially replicated. However, Shepherd is able, at least in certain moments within his performance, to achieve what Burton achieves via exactly the means it is suggested that Burton does not achieve it: commitment to studied precision, rote practice--and, of the assistance of patently unnatural media technologies. What’s more, Shepherd’s performance often carries the effect of Burton’s; for all its “unnaturalness,” its Woostery refusal of transformation, it most often appears (or did to my eyes) not as a bloodless or distanced facsimile but as passionate, Burton-worthy Shakespeare--the very sort of “great works” performance I recalled my own nostalgia for earlier. Though at many moments Shepherd has an easy, expressly casual relationship with audience, and with the technicians and actors surrounding him, that puts no premium on maintaining theatrical illusion, there are also times when his work *as* Burton is very much like Burton’s work--that is, when it appears to be

impassioned, heartfelt, the presentation of a roiled internal state. Earlier, I cited Auslander on the Group's aesthetic's disinterest in "transformation" and the attendant "implication that the actors are really experiencing the emotions they portray"; critics like Savran have suggested that "disinterestedness" itself is a hallmark "of the Wooster Group's classical aesthetic," an evaluation echoed by Jennifer Parker-Starbuck's description of an earlier performance of Shepherd's (in *To You The Birdie!*) as delivered in "disassociated and deadpan Wooster fashion" (Savran *Obeying* 67; Parker-Starbuck 225). Though in this case Shepherd's performance may be just as disinterested and dissociated, due to the fidelity of his imitation of Burton it can carry some of the effect, sporadically, of the kind of work critics like Auslander define the Groups work *against*. Shepherd's performance may be a task-based enterprise in mimicry, but it also sometimes reads as classical theater, finely delivered with all the passion Burton's talent could muster.

Watching Shepherd reproducing, with the aid of monitors and ear piece, Burton's performance of Hamlet (albeit an overtly edited version) presents a confusion somewhat similar to that produced by the actors' mixed and amplified vocals: it is difficult to begin to separate Shepherd's performance from Burton's, even though the former is temporally live and physically embodied, and the latter is an often faint and partial projection, just as it can be difficult to distinguish their voices. As Shepherd seems to match Burton breath for breath and

syllable for syllable, reproducing tone, gesture and line reading with impressive accuracy;<sup>17</sup> it becomes challenging--or even impossible--to isolate the two actors' performances not only in terms of ownership or agency (who, exactly, is performing when Shepherd mimics Burton alongside Burton's moving image, coupled with his recorded voice?) but in terms of the way those performances are constructed and characterized. Burton, after all, is acting in a representational fashion; his stage work is, if not an example of realism, recognizable as representational mimesis that seeks to work a theatrical illusion. His work is further charged with the artistic mission of interpreting a canonical dramatic text. Shepherd, on the other hand, is performing presentationally, abjuring illusion, and is engaged in an imitative process rather than an interpretive one--something continually emphasized by the projection of Burton (sometimes obscured or erased, but always present, if only through his absence) on the screen behind him.

An audience never forgets--is never permitted to, thanks to the work's premise and the projection of Burton--that Shepherd is mimicking a prior, if virtualized and altered, performance. The more exacting the imitation, however, the closer it comes to being, or being received as, or being, at moments, *indistinguishable* from, precisely the sort of theatrical

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<sup>17</sup> Shepherd's skill is not mobilized in this performance alone; in a 2007 performance of Elevator Repair Service's *No Great Society* I watched him use similar mimicry to impersonate Ed Sanders' (from the band The Fugs) appearance on a 1968 episode of William H. Buckley's *Firing Line*, and the critic Ben Brantley wrote in *The New York Times* of the Group's *Poor Theatre* (in 2005) that the second half of the work "is giddily infused with the promise of transcendence, thanks in part to the uncanny evocation of Mr. Forsythe by the actor Scott Shepherd, who suggests that being sewn into someone else's skin does not have to be taxidermy."

performance it pointedly is not.<sup>18</sup> At its most successful, it carries the affect that the original does *as well as* exceeding that performance in a display of polyvalence, issuing a challenge to the idea that Burton's effect on an audience could only be the product of an authentic creative act of natural brilliance.

### ***“Real” acting.***

The creative, artistic aspect of theatrical acting is sometimes highlighted through its opposition to the rote work of machines, its apparent passionate vitality contrasted with the lifelessness of digital or machinic reproduction in a manner that recalls, at least obliquely, the attenuated aura of the reproduced art object in Walter Benjamin's *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this imaginary, “good” or successful theatrical performance is considered to require, at a basic level, the artistic capabilities human beings (or some among them) are thought to possess but which machines, supposedly, do not: creativity, passion, spontaneity, inspiration. Revealing an insistent and foundational humanism, these notions characterize the artistic work of actors in language that sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly opposes it to work that is mechanical, soulless, empty of life--the way a machine, robot or automaton might be considered to be. Descriptors for “bad,” uninspired acting that include “wooden,” “mechanical,” or “robotic” imply that vitality and some sort of human spark is necessary for actors' mission to capture human likeness in acts of theatrical mimesis.

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, although this slippage is a compelling feature of Shepherd's performance, it isn't equally appreciable throughout the production. Ari Fliakos, as Claudius, also employs a mimicry that could “pass,” at moments, as the original, but Kate Valk seems almost to mock Linda Marsh's “ingenué” presentation of Ophelia, and while Valk sometimes seems to “send up,” in a similar fashion, Eileen Herlie's Gertrude, at other moments she seems--to my subjective eye, at least--entirely sincere.

Stanislavski himself, the progenitor of the psychorealism so dominant in acting studios and theaters in the United States, used language (or has been translated so) that opposes worthwhile, effective theatrical acting to “mechanical,” by-rote performance, and faults the latter for its lack of vitality and humanity. He writes of “Ready-made mechanical tricks” that are “easily reproduced by stock-in-trade actors with trained muscles” (29).<sup>19</sup> In words which emphasize the importance he places on the individual human actor’s “real experiencing” of a role, he describes how “Using mimicry . . . the stock-in-trade actor only presents the audience with external cliches, as though they expressed ‘the life of the human spirit’ of a role, a dead mask for non-existent feelings. . . . There is only imitation, a resemblance to its supposed outer results” (28). For Stanislavski, the exterior, the “dead mask” can never deliver passion, the vital content of theater--a quantity so inimitable that, one supposes, even exacting mimicry of the delivery of that passion itself, something along the lines of what I argue Shepherd is doing with Burton’s performance, would fail to satisfy. In a chapter that Jean Benedetti, in his recent translation and re-organization of Stanislavski’s major acting texts, calls “Imagination,” Stanislavski’s alter-ego Tortsov ends a lecture to his student actors with a statement that casts imagination--creativity itself--opposite that which is mechanical:

Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: *every one of our movements on stage, every word must be the result of a truthful imagination.* If you speak a word, or do something mechanically on stage, not knowing who you are, where you have come from, why, what you need, where you are going, or what you will do there, you will be

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<sup>19</sup> Stanislavski had a contentious relationship with the notion of a trained body. Early in his own career as an actor, Joseph Roach writes that “He despised in himself the automatization implied by his ability to perform [technical feats]. He seems to have resented the surrender of consciousness implied by his mechanical habit” (*Passion* 204). However, later in his career as a teacher “The strong muscular memory he had distrusted in actors survived in his thinking to become a crucial element in the System” (215).

acting without imagination . . . You will perform like a machine that's been wound up, like an automaton. . . . So, not a single scene not one single step on stage must be performed mechanically, without an inner reason, that is without the imagination . . . Make it a rule never to do anything onstage mechanically, as a mere outward form (84-5, emphasis in original).

In the writing he left regarding his “system,” Stanislavski advocates tirelessly for an “art of experiencing” that happens anew in each performance and cannot rely on the imitation or reproduction of past performances or theatrical convention; it is this mode of performance that harnesses the imagination referenced above and so resists mere mechanics. This preferred mode of performance is often contrasted not only with the unspeakable “stock-in-trade” acting, but with the somewhat more respectable “art of representation,” to which Stanislavski begrudgingly admits the status of “art” but for which he appears to have little regard. Stanislavski chides those actors who “register the outward form a feeling takes” and then “learn to *repeat it mechanically* . . . This is the representation, the reproduction of a role” (23, emphasis mine). These technicians do not, he writes, “live each role truthfully, humanly” in the moment of performance, and so may create beautiful representations, but will necessarily fail to deliver a deeply compelling performance:

They believe that the stage life they create is better. Not the genuine, human life we actually know, but another which has been enhanced. . . . This kind of acting has beauty but no depth. It is effective rather than deep. Form is more interesting than content. It acts on the eyes and ears rather than on the heart and, in consequence, more readily delights than disturbs . . . [I]t can give you the theatrically beautiful, or picture-postcard feelings. But when it comes to the expression of deep passions, it is either too showy or too superficial. The subtlety and depth of human feelings will not yield to mere technique (26).

Scott Shepherd is doing nearly exactly what Stanislavski says this type of acting cannot do: there are moments when it appears his “mechanical” work of reproduction/re-presentation achieves the effect of a passionate, inspired, interpretive performance not unlike Burton’s, even though it is quite explicitly “repeated mechanically with the help of trained muscles.” As I have previously noted, Burton was not a Stanislavskian actor, but to the extent that Stanislavski sought a performance with the air of spontaneity, one that seemed fresh and lifelike instead of a canned repetition of formal gestures, Burton’s reputation for volatility on stage seem aligned with this aspect of Stanislavski’s project. In fact, Burton’s lack of fealty to *any* studied acting technique makes him a rather apt example of one whose work features the “subtlety and depth of human feelings” not as a result of “mere technique” but of the “expression of deep passions.”

As I hope is already clear, the division I am sketching between the figures of creative, protean, *organic* performer and the lifelessness of mechanical imitation or projection is constructed (and not always consistently so) rather than natural or inevitable, and it is also dependent on specific historical and cultural epistemologies subject to flux and change. It seems unlikely that the importance of the variability highlighted by liveness I discussed at length earlier in the chapter, for example, would be so fetishized outside the ubiquity of mediatized representations. Similarly, the valorizing of (and implied opposition between) the human being as artist over a mechanical (or later, an electronic) apparatus is hardly eternal or universal. Edward Gordon Craig wrote of the inadequacy of the human for the expressive work of theater, favoring masks and puppets: “Drama which is not trivial takes us beyond reality, and asks a human face, the realest of things, to express all that. It is unfair” (104). The



countenances of masks and puppets, rather, are capable of a pure expression that can exceed that available to human actors (even, presumably, masters like Scott Shepherd):

Masks carry conviction when he who creates them is an artist, for the artist limits the statements which he places upon these masks. The face of the actor carries no such conviction; it is over-full of fleeting expression--frail, restless, disturbed and disturbing" (103)

The actor, here--the person charged with the embodiment of representation--is not valued for his mercurial changeability but rather advised to obscure his own fallible, inconstant face with a mask--perhaps not unlike the "dead mask" to which Stanislavski likens a cliché-ridden portrayal--if he takes the stage at all, so that he may approach the cool precision of a machine. Before Craig, Heinrich von Kleist also considered puppets to be superior to human actors, since, like gods, they might be capable of faultless grace and incapable of affectation. Craig and von Kleist, of course, were not attempting realism and did not see in it the pinnacle of what theatrical representation could achieve; Craig desired the theater to "[take] us beyond reality," not flawlessly impersonate it (104).

Even for traditions or styles, like contemporary realism, that did and do value "naturalness," the quality of the imitation of nature was, of course, similarly contingent. In an invaluable history of the imbrication of theatrical acting and science, Joseph Roach points out that "Today we tend to use *natural* and *organic* as synonyms, but in Garrick's day [David Garrick, the celebrated 18th century English actor] Romanticism, Naturalism, and Darwinism had yet to proclaim that we have more in common with the scum on the pond than with the statue in the park" (*Passion* 59, emphasis in original). He points to a then-contemporary understanding of the human being as machinelike in its animation, powered by an unknown "spirit" which might or might not be corporeal. The distinction between living, embodied

actors and pointedly artificial automata, puppets, machines, and masks was not always so oppositional.

In the eighteenth century, Roach writes, the nervous system became known as the seat of the passions, and in “casting about for an analogy to explain their materialization of animate motion, the pioneers of modern nerve physiology pressed into service the actor’s historic analogue and his most bitterly resented rival--the mechanical puppet” (*Passion* 61). The proliferation of this metaphor finds expression in one of theater history’s often-told anecdotes, in which David Garrick hired a wig-maker to “simulate the precise physiognomy of mortal dread”: that is, a mechanical hair-piece capable of literally raising Garrick’s hair. “On the line ‘Look, my lord, it comes,’” the hairs of this remarkable appliance rose up obligingly at the actor’s command. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, flipped his wig” (*Passion* 58). As Roach explains, the mechanical wig becomes less a joke than an important artifact “when confronted in [its] proper context, one that includes the hypothesis boldly set forth in that era by La Mettrie: ‘Man is a machine.’” (qtd in *Passion* 60). Under this paradigm, the mechanics of masterful imitation could be applauded as virtuosic--rather like my clear admiration of Shepherd’s mimicry--rather than dismissed as superficial. Garrick, certainly, saw the act of imitation not as uninspired stock-in-trade acting, but the valuable and proper result of near scientific observation: Roach notes that Garrick “defined acting as ‘articulation, corporeal motion, and ocular expression’ done *in imitation of* the various mental and bodily emotions’ incident to human nature” (*Passion* 89, emphasis mine).

Not only have mechanics and overt imitation (as opposed to Stanislavski’s “true experiencing” and some later Method gurus’ insistence on actors’ “honest” self-revelation in

their work) not always been as taboo as contemporary realism makes them, for all the explicit vilifying of the mechanical I have previously cited, Stanislavski himself was quite specifically invested in *systematizing* the actor's craft into a repeatable process, in a way that the scholar Jonathan Pitches finds not unlike Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor's effort to efficiently systematize workflow via means, like the assembly line, that seem quite mechanical and particularly opposed to spontaneity and artistry. Pitches writes that Stanislavsky sought "a deliverable efficiency which has strong associations with the Taylorist formula for [factory] work: break things down achievable tasks, take the strain out of the work by rationalizing how it is to be delivered, and above all strive for simplicity" (41). Further, Jean Benedetti notes that Stanislavski was strongly concerned with "automatic reflexes" and "believed that some 90 percent of normal behavior was automatic":

"In life I consciously make decisions, create intentions, but the actions I perform to carry them out are, for the most part, reflex. If I decide to write a letter, I may think consciously about what I am going to say, but my hands will write or type apparently of their own accord, spontaneously. These are what we might call operations, we operate as a machine operates [sic]" (3).

Despite his frequent rhetoric that denigrates the mechanical, Stanislavski, in his mission to free the actor from helpless subjection from the unpredictable vagaries of inspiration through recourse to a dependable technique,<sup>20</sup> did indeed attempt to systematize, even, at times, to *mechanize* the production of "good" acting. It is true that early in his career as an actor, as Roach notes, "He despised in himself the automatization implied by his ability to perform

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<sup>20</sup> In a passage that I will examine at greater length in the next chapter, Stanislavski writes, "It is always best when an actor is completely taken over by the play. Then, independent of his will, he lives the role, without noticing *how* he is feeling, not thinking about *what* he is doing, and so everything comes out spontaneously, subconsciously. But, unfortunately, this is not always within our power to control . . . you have to learn how to stimulate and control [nature] . . . arouse and involve the creative subconscious by indirect, conscious means (17).

[technical feats]. He seems to have resented the surrender of consciousness implied by his mechanical habit” (*Passion* 204). Roach also points out, however, that later in his career as a teacher “The strong muscular memory he had distrusted in actors survived in his thinking to become a crucial element in the System” (215). Stanislavski seems to have reckoned with this aporia by differentiating between the “rubber stamp” of thoughtlessly clichéd stage acting and ““*Mechanical* or *motor* adjustments [which are] . . . normal, natural, human adaptations that are carried to a point of becoming purely mechanical . . . without sacrificing their quality of naturalness. Because they remain organic and human, they are the antithesis of the rubber stamp”” (qtd in *Passion* 206, emphasis reproduced in Roach).

Writing of “natural” or realist acting, then, necessitates both some contextualization of those notions within a theatrical tradition that exceeds realism, and an examination of the insistent humanism that informs contemporary realist practices. One notable marker of this humanism is the consistent (though complex) opposition of the actor’s art or craft with the work of machines or technologies of reproduction, something visible in Stanislavski. Other markers, however, become apparent if focus is turned to the later American interpreters of Stanislavski whose teachings continue to dominate the teaching and practice of acting in the United States. As Debby Thompson noted in 2003 (in a discussion of “post-structuralist acting practices” in the work of Anna Deavere Smith), “acting practice in the U.S. . . . is still very much based in liberal humanism”:

The preponderant philosophy underlying acting approaches taught in the U.S. remains one of liberal humanism. The majority of actors' training programs in North America continue to operate in variations of the Stanislavski approach (or its American incarnation, Method Acting), which views human nature as transcultural and transhistorical, and views a character's identity as having an essential core of interior objectives and the character's (or actor's) bodily acts as

the outward manifestations of the character's interior identity. The "Naturalistic" Acting Approach varies from the versions of Stanislavsky himself to those of, for example, Uta Hagen, Sanford Meisner, Eric Morris, and William H. Macy and David Mamet. As different as these various commonly taught approaches seem to be, all believe that human nature is universal, and that the essence of acting is to uncover the human spirit, to bring out the universal in the specifics of human life. (128)

Not only is literal humanity a prerequisite for acting, under the logic of psychorealism, but a specific sort of essential selfhood, an interiority which can be made exterior, expressed artistically through theatrical performance. As Thompson suggests, the most prominent schools and teachers of psychorealist acting take as foundational not only human-ness, but a universal "human nature," which it is the actor's task to enliven on the stage. The presumed universality of this human nature is undoubtedly problematic, and has prompted many necessary critiques not only of theatrical realism, but the particular pedagogies that bring contemporary psychorealism to the stage.

My intent here is not to re-rehearse these arguments, but to point to how the notions that undergird Stanislavski's realism meaningfully change as they are re-interpreted through the lenses of American acting teachers of the twentieth century in ways that have strong implications for liveness, and by extension, for intermedial work. The ideas of Stanislavski, though not un-humanist themselves, morph into the particular humanism of his later interpreters as they translated and re-directed his ideas in mid-twentieth century contexts in which mediatization was an ascendant force, as new and revolutionary technologies of recording and dissemination were developed. Where Stanislavski had insisted continuously on "truth" in representation, later theorist-pedagogues shifted stronger emphasis to the ways in which *liveness*, often figured as spontaneity, precipitated that state of truth--and by liveness, in

this case, I mean the liveness of the actor in the moment of embodied performance, regardless of the final disposition of that performance (that is, even if it ended up on film). Those later interpreters, in reworking Stanislavski's "real experiencing" to emphasize the *immediate* moment, posited that immediacy as the only substrate out of which honest performance could arise.

### **The organic (and the cyborg?).**

Many of the textbooks that were assigned to me in my training as an actor (texts which were not new then, by any means, and are still widely taught in the United States), including those of Uta Hagen and Sanford Meisner, specifically task the actor with being the engine of unpredictability that drives theater's exciting variability. Uta Hagen<sup>21</sup> writes that the acting of Laurette Taylor and Albert Basserman "electrified" her because

[T]heir genius manifested itself in the utter spontaneity and unpredictability of their actions. You believed their existence in the present, that everything was happening to them from **moment to moment**, as if for the first time. They seemed as surprised by the events that stormed in on them during the course of the play as the audience . . . [E]very time I took another friend to see *The Glass Menagerie*, just as Laurette Taylor was about to execute one of those extraordinary actions, one that had etched itself on my mind, I would poke my companion and whisper, "Wait till you see what she does now!" It was no

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<sup>21</sup> Hagen, as Rosemary Malague notes, was not a Stanislavskian at the beginning of her career and was of a slightly younger generation than the notable Stanislavski-influenced acting teachers--including Adler, Meisner and Strasberg--who came out of the Group Theater. Still, she came to regard Stanislavski's work highly and consider it useful. Hagen's own assessment of realism's requirements of the actor, affected by her exposure (largely through Harold Clurman) to the Group's interpretations of Stanislavski but largely developed through her own practical experience as a working actor, include a near total collapsing of the distance between character and actor. Malague deftly characterizes her aesthetic with this quotation from an interview with the *New York Times*' Helen Dudar in 1985: "'My standard of performance,' [Hagen] said, 'is that I forget I'm seeing an actor and think I'm watching a human being. I believe this in my bones'" (qtd in Malague 154).

longer there. However, that same evening there were ten new unforgettable moments in other places. . . . The technique of playing in the moment, which these geniuses understood intuitively, a technique which disallows the anticipation of what's to come (any thinking ahead to the next line, action or cue), is one i have striven consciously to perfect for most of my career. (123-4, boldface in original)

Hagen's emphasis on actors "playing in the moment" is often articulated as an exhortation to "be in the moment," one I recall, with clarity and some discomfort, from my own training. I remember the phrase being offered as if its meaning were self-evident, but the authors of *Practical Handbook for the Actor* (which outlines the "practical aesthetics" taught at the Atlantic Theater Company's training program in New York) do offer a kind of definition, suggesting that, ideally, "Many physical activities are the result of living impulsively in the moment. These spontaneous moments are in essence the fruits of this technique. The best sign that an action [defined in this technique as "the physical pursuance of a specific goal" (87)] is working and that an actor is really living in the moment is when his impulses begin to express themselves through the body uncensored by intellect" (54). Leaving aside, for the moment, the troubling notion of "intellect" as a censor inimical to artistry, what I wish to emphasize are the ways in which specifically the *unpredictability* of the live moment, the variability and vulnerability supposedly obviated by the act of recording, is considered fundamental to good acting. Liveness is posited as necessary to acting not in the sense that the recorded performances of film and television can never be authentic, but in the sense that every performance is created and delivered, whether into a camera or other recording device or a playhouse stage, in a moment defined by the open possibilities of its liveness, since what is required of the actor in this model is an unhindered impulsivity, an open acquiescence to the compulsions or inclinations that surface in the vanishing instant of performance. That

unpredictability is also suggested, implicitly, as the special gift of the properly attuned actor, one who is vital and responsive to minute, constant changes in atmosphere and circumstance that attend the vanishing instant of live performance.

Under dominant realist theories, good acting is often opposed to rote mechanics, and the art or craft of acting is valorized as a particularly, even uniquely, human endeavor, one which trades on ideas of a fully realized humanity as the seat of artistic potential. For twentieth century standard-bearers of Stanislavski's mandates, it is also regularly described in terms that emphasize its status as the product of human bodies and selves: it is "organic," "natural," or, as Auslander put it in an earlier citation, "self-revelatory." Even the approaches' emphasis on honesty seems to celebrate the capability for self-revelation that only human selves are seen to possess, and which they wield most powerfully in an unplanned, spontaneous moment. Time and time again, what is lauded in techniques such as Hagen's is behavior that is couched, implicitly or explicitly, as *live* in multiple valences: *alive*, *living*, *inspired* (in the sense of drawing breath), but also vital in its mercurial changeability, in the unpredictability that supposedly differentiates live behavior or performance from the pre-determined inevitability of a stable recording.

The teachings of Hagen, Sanford Meisner, and the authors of the *Practical Handbook* place a strong emphasis specifically on spontaneity (on "in the moment" or "moment to moment" work in which the actor responds with acute sensitivity to changing circumstance) that is difficult to locate in Stanislavski--or it may be that in different eras, a similar result is couched in different ways. Certainly, Stanislavski is repeatedly concerned with "real experiencing" as productive of an illusion that stage business is authentic, but it is significant



that those who built on his technique later in the twentieth century figure this so consistently as the result of impulse and spontaneous, unpredictable action: acting which not only refuses to recycle past performance, as Stanislavski warns against, but specifically emphasizes impulsivity and unpredictability as much as, or as *constitutive of*, Stanislavski's "truth" and "real experiencing." The "organic" approach advocated by these later writers requires authentic performance with the same exacting sternness that Stanislavski did, but they give greater weight to the actor's "organic" response to the unplanned, unforeseeable, live moment of performance as the specific guarantor of authenticity or truth.

This seems an important departure, or at least distinction, between Stanislavski (who refined his ideas about acting until his death in 1938) and certain mid-century interpreters of psychorealism like Hagen, Meisner, and the authors of the *Practical Handbook*, whose ideas were articulated during an period marked by the dominance and ubiquity of film and television. The later authors' focus on being "in the (live) moment" marks a concern, conscious or not, with liveness that seems not to have similarly preoccupied Stanislavski, for all his concern with "real experiencing" on stage. Recording technologies like film, video and television, after all, put "the moment" into question, making that live moment of performance ripe for fetishization not only by those eager to characterize the "magic" of theater as its liveness, as Auslander critiques, but by those attempting to translate Stanislavski's rigorous demand for truth for/into an increasingly mediatized world. Stanislavski's objection to rote mechanization is somewhat similar, in that it advises a freshness appropriate to the circumstances at hand over a "canned" performance, but nowhere in his major texts is there this preoccupation with *the moment*.

This shift of focus reveals an important imbrication between truth (or perceived truth) and the immediacy liveness is presumed to offer: when spontaneity and unpredictability are fundamental to acting that is prized as an honest revelation of self, liveness itself--an actor's fidelity to presence in the vanishing moment--becomes a near requirement for truthfulness. The wandering attention, laziness, politesse, or over-intellectualization that these techniques suggest separate an actor from her (supposedly) immediate and honest responses might threaten the "truth" of acting in the same way mediatization is commonly seen to threaten theater's constitutive liveness. Meisner, in particular, all but equates any process or intervention which distances (or is considered to distance) an actor's affective response from the actions comprising her performance with the imposition of a intermediary that attenuates or obscures the performance's truth, and therefore its value.

During my own training in Sanford Meisner's technique, an instructor repeatedly shared an anecdote from Meisner's acting class (the story is more formally recorded in Meisner's book, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, from which the below citations are drawn), in which Meisner tells a female student

"Your line is, 'Mr. Meisner,'" and then "slips his hand into her blouse. 'Mr. Meisner!' she giggles, drawing away from his touch. 'You see how *true* that acting is, how full emotionally,' Meisner says" (emphasis added).

The story, while troubling on any number of accounts, unequivocally endows a specifically reflexive and unplanned (and, meaningfully, gender appropriate) response with truth. After the demonstration, Meisner addresses the class:

"I'm talking and illustrating something which is basic, which is organic to the technique . . . . Spontaneity is involved in this, right? What else?"  
"Truthfulness," [one of his students] replies. "It is the basis of being truthful."  
"Yes," says Meisner, "it is" (35-6).

Meisner often uses the term “impulse,” as does the *Practical Handbook*, to designate an performer’s sudden desire to act, emphasizing that desire’s supposed spontaneity while preserving a sort of conditional agency for the actor: the “impulsive” response is in one sense nearly autonomic in its insusceptibility to critical thought--its priority before *any* thinking activity--but it is also identified as a skilled, valid (for Meisner, as the *only* valid) *artistic* response, one which can be critiqued and directed. That is, within Meisner’s logic, the “correct” response--the one that is “true” and “emotionally full”--is on one hand so essential that it is nearly unavoidable and, on the other, open to evaluation and correction: in Meisner’s book, there are many occasions when the student is critiqued for *not* responding impulsively, for being insufficiently attuned to her own impulse or recalcitrantly attached to falsehood out of fear or habit. In one of them, a student--Ray--asks him about how to personalize the “given circumstances” of a scene. In response to the student’s question--“How do you make those choices?”--Meisner says, “They come from your instincts.” When the student presses further, seemingly trying to get Meisner to contend with the idea that different actors might have widely ranging instincts in or responses to a given situation, Meisner says,

“Is there ever a time, no matter how many times Beth [a student in the class] plays in *The Children’s Hour*,” when that character is not going to have to squirm with misery when she announces that her boyfriend is never coming back?”

After a pause, Ray says, “You put me in a spot because I want to say, ‘No,’ [the answer Meisner clearly wants] but at the same time I want to say that an equally valid reading would be if she were pissed off . . . and so anger comes out instead.”

“Then it’s a mischoice.”

“Okay, that’s what I’m asking. How do you make the *right* choice?”

“Your instinct!” (140-1)

Meisner's reliance on "instinct" and spontaneity is shown to be similarly circular throughout his book: instinctual action is good, but a response outside the norm (or, it seems, which the teacher merely dislikes) cannot be sufficiently instinctual but is, instead, a "*mischoice*" (emphasis mine).

While I have used the word "spontaneous" in these pages without consistent scare quotes, I cite the above example to demonstrate that I remain healthily suspicious of the unencumbered, liberatory, or "pure" nature of a spontaneously impulsive response, despite the credulity of the teachers I cite. Jonathan Pitches's illumination of the link between Pavlov and Stanislavski suggests that "reflexive," with its connotation of automatic physiological response, might be a more apt adjective to describe these teachers' desired responses, although I suspect Meisner's use of "impulse" is strategic in its simultaneous invocation of and slight distance from the implied autonomic biology of "reflex." Where "reflexive" points to a response contingent on training and reinforcement, including the inescapable disciplining that informs normative presentations of gender, class, et cetera., the more romantic "impulsive" or "spontaneous" suggests an unfettered and response legible as an artistic urge or compulsion. Such terms assume and privilege artistic idiosyncrasy over involuntary, conditioned reaction, even as the teachers who deploy them exhort students to react without thinking, in order to access "truth." One of Meisner's most famous dicta is, "Don't do anything unless something happens to make you do it"--a transparently Pavlovian maxim that might make "honest" acting seem nearly unavoidable, so long as any stage action was a response to a previous happening, except that Meisner alone seems to have been the arbiter, in his class, capable of discerning which responses were "impulsive" and which ones were a hollow show, lazy in their

inexactitude, misdirected, or the false products of habit (35). The highly conditional nature of the “truth” betrayed by rigorous compliance with impulse--so highly determined by disciplinary forces and compliance with codes of gender, ethnicity, age or other identifying factors--is, unsurprisingly, not emphasized or even discussed. Rosemary Malague notes that, in what she believes are “sincere efforts to restore actors to their pure instinct, Meisner does not acknowledge--or even understand--that what he is seeking is really an ‘act,’ a repetition of longstanding social and cultural performances” (152). Malague also argues that “the extent to which ‘truthful’ behavior is that of white, mainstream, middle-class, American culture (which is its own imaginary universal)” may leave actors unable or unwilling to reproduce it--or whose gender or other presentations do not fit the norm--completely excluded from “organic” techniques as they are commonly taught (190). One of the most problematic aspects of “organic” approaches is the permission they implicitly give non-normative behavior or presentations to be excluded as untruthful and unworthy, regardless of the presenter’s personal “truth.” In fact, Malague notes multiple occasions when Meisner, asserts or denies the *truth* of a response based on its complicity with heteronormativity and normative gender performance.

A reliance on impulsive response also, as I have previously suggested, situates critical engagement as “head work” that should either be separated from the doing of acting--the responding in the moment--or abjured all together. The exercise that forms the core of Meisner’s technique<sup>22</sup> began when Meisner “wanted an exercise for actors where there is no intellectuality. I wanted to eliminate all that ‘head’ work, to take away all the mental

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<sup>22</sup> This is often referred to as “repetition,” or the repetition exercise--see Malague for not only an explanation of the exercise, but an excellent analysis of its implications. She deftly connects this exercise in explicit repetition with the disciplined iteration of codes and stylized behaviors that constitutes gender under Butlerian performativity.

manipulation and get to where the impulses come from” (36). And where those “impulses” come from, it is implied, is the interior of the self--in Meisner’s words, “the heart”--the *human* heart, the thing computers, machines, and the mechanical Tin Man alike do not have--and not the heavy pressure of inescapable social conditioning. Also perhaps notable is the implication that the head--the supposed seat of intellect and analysis--is not such an interior source, the brain not a commensurate source of authenticity. Under this logic, even *thought*--also arguably fetishized, rightly or wrongly, as a defining ability of humanity--is potentially a threat to the immediacy that warrants truth in behavior and performance.

Meisner’s philosophy, especially, presents many troubling difficulties, so much so that isolating any one of them for analysis can be difficult. What I mean to emphasize over everything else, however, is a resounding preoccupation--in not just Meisner’s theories and teaching, but those of Uta Hagen and other teacher-theorists who prescribed “best practices” for realistic acting in the mid-twentieth century that continue to wield enormous, formative influence in acting classrooms--for immediacy as the guarantor of truth. Immediacy and liveness are not the same thing, but the link seems clear; what the immediate is free of, after all, is a mediating force, a medium. Performers who are responding “in the moment” are, ostensibly, the livest of the live, not only in terms of their embodied presence but in their super-attentive awareness of the changing, ephemeral *now*. When they relax the concentration required for the “moment to moment” work whose agility and unpredictability so affected Hagen, their performances become less live but also, implicitly, less truthful--or, rather, less truthful *because* they are less live.

David Zucker Saltz actually repeats this logic in his argument for interactive media as a valuable tool for “live” performance, noting that “Live performance is inherently interactive. The spontaneous give-and-take between performers and spectators, and among a group of sensitive performers, is integral to theatre’s appeal as an art form” (109). What he calls linear media, however, suffer all the faults of the actor insufficiently attuned to the live moment to respond flexibly and unpredictably with in it:

Now consider the impact of injecting linear media into a live theatrical performance. Imagine an extended scene between a live actor and a videotaped actor. Unlike a live partner, the videotape will be unforgiving of any errors the live actor might make (for example, missing a cue) and will never adapt to variations in the rhythms or dynamics of the actor’s delivery. The medium forces the live actor to conform rigorously to it. Such a performance combines the worst of both theatre and media: *it lends the live performance a canned quality* without endowing it with any of film or video’s advantages, such as the ability to select the best takes, edit out the mistakes, or apply camera movement or jump cuts to the live actor’s performance. It is no wonder that extensive use of linear media has never become more than an occasional gimmick in the theatre. (109, emphasis added)

Linear media is the least “live;” it inhibits, or is incapable of harnessing or reacting to, the spontaneous, variable response that marks liveness and is, according to Saltz, the province of theater in a mediatized age. Like a stock-in-trade actor using the mechanical help of trained muscles in a repeated, repeatable performance, it cannot change its delivery to suit the exigencies or circumstances of the moment. Interactive media, however,

do not sap the spontaneity or variability from a live performance, as linear media do, since they embody those qualities. Media are interactive to the extent that they adapt to the performer rather than making the performer adapt to them. By definition, the more interactive the media, the more responsive.

It may be something of a stretch to link the responsiveness of interactive media, in Saltz’s description, to the impulsivity or unpredictability of the actor under Hagen or Meisner’s

model, but each is valued for a temporal responsiveness. Meaningfully, Saltz does not cloud his argument with references to a contingent “truth” presented as a known and knowable good, and his article emphatically suggests the value of the *inorganic* to live theater instead of championing the organic artistry of the human being. However, even this argument *for* the productive introduction of mediatization into theatrical performance reaffirms the overwhelming value of that which is responsive in the live moment. Live performance is, for Saltz, “inherently interactive” to begin with, richly variable, and moreover valuable *because of* its variability and unpredictability, in the midst of dominant forms of “linear” media like film and television which lack the same (and even “sap” it from live performance when the two forms coincide). When media can match that sensitivity, marked variously as interactivity (media) and variability (live performance), they do not endanger theater’s work. When media fail to do so, they sound as ham-handed as Stanislavski’s stock-in-trade actor, delivering nothing but “canned” content and pre-conceived interpretations impenetrable by the realities of the live moment.

If, for the latter-day realist acting techniques I have described, the perceived immediacy of the moment of live performance is deeply imbricated with (and required for) “truth,” and truth itself is the highest good, tinkering with the liveness of theater becomes a very meaningful act. If liveness is compromised or thrown into question, as in much contemporary intermedial theater--and even in the early attempt at hybridity that was Theatrofilm--any acting teacher’s admonition to be true to what happens in the volatile, ever-disappearing live moment loses traction. Because conventional uses of mediatization (and it



bears repeating that these are the uses to which technologies of mediatization are commonly put, not their only purpose or essential quality) render a live moment more predictable and iterable, the unpredictability that signals, within the logic of this teaching, truth and even humanity are put in jeopardy, destabilized as grounds for performance. To be sure, “truth” and “authenticity” have probably never been stable grounds, at least not from a postmodern stance; it might be more precise to say that the intervention of media can expose those notions as the rather slippery fish they have always been. Intermedial performance like the Wooster Group’s *Hamlet*, however, can make plain through the *doing* of acting (or capable mimicry of the same) the questionable assumptions the practice itself often relies on. Links between liveness and authenticity are knotty and persistent, and also relatively unquestioned within logics that locate liveness and its properties as constitutive of theater, but when the liveness of theater is interrupted, overtly contaminated with mediatization rather than fetishized, those links can be exposed and prodded, staged provocatively rather than obscured as invisibly foundational.

***Having cake and eating it, too.***

The Wooster Group’s reconstructive work has long allowed them to borrow performance styles they do not regularly practice or train in. In the case of *Hamlet*, the use of the Electronovision recording gave them a way to “do” Shakespeare: LeCompte told Jane Kramer that “when she heard her actors at the Garage “‘struggling with that Shakespearean language’ she started watching ‘Hamlet’ movies with them, and thought of Burton . . . ‘I thought, This is what I do—bring things together. I take something, I copy it, and maybe something’s revealed that’s not in the original.’” Eventually, the group created the “edited

‘Burton template,’” the audio of which was supplied to the actors via earpiece while the video played on screens and monitors around them, enabling the performers’ project of matching body and voice to the recording. Kramer notes that LeCompte “believes in the power of surfaces to deepen and disturb—or, as she puts it, to “surprise”—reality.” Here, LeCompte makes use of surfaces to complicate the sort of performance often understood as an expression of interiority. She describes Shepherd as initially attracted to the surface, the outward characteristics, of Burton’s filmed performance (“‘He [Burton] was in love with his own voice, and that was the attraction for Scott. The voice and the words’”), an element which largely became the premise of the work: “LeCompte, who had started by saying, in effect, ‘Forget the words!,’ decided that ‘Hamlet’ *was* the words. They became the telling surface, the artifice and style that deepens.”

LeCompte described this reconstructive borrowing of appearances and the mimicry that produces it as “a new naturalism” in an interview with Linda Yablonsky:

EL In the early days, when they talked about “imagistic theater,” the critics were not really... watching, were not really listening. They’d lump us with Mabou Mines, for instance, who were doing much more visual imagistic theater, and there was a whole dance- into-theater movement that we really had very little in common with, except that we were, exploring the outer reaches of performance. . . . I don’t have a psychological structure and then get a space to illustrate it. I tend to want a physical structure that I then want to bring alive with performers. I treat the words with equal weight to my sound or visual elements. I don’t try to destroy them, or obliterate them, as some people accuse.

LY Because of the layering and overlapping?

EL Yes, I take a very static structure and have it in some way accumulate and disintegrate at the same time. I treated “Three Sisters” linearly up until Act III. In Act III, the structure of the play is being fucked with for the first time. All of a sudden, two scenes overlap on the stage, and actions are repeated several times that have never been repeated before

so you have overlaps, jump-cuts, rewinds, and going forward. There's the sense that something is disintegrating. The interruptions become less illusionist in direction and more real as in technical interruptions. That's disturbing.

LY Do you have a name for this kind of theater? It's very stylized, and very natural at the same time. It's hard to characterize.

EL It's difficult for me too, because we've never fit into any of the "isms," either theatrical or artistic . . . . Peter Sellars did the best when he talked about it as an *extreme* form of naturalism. A new naturalism—that's the way I'd like to think about it. That people might think I've taken naturalism so far, they can't tell the difference, that this might be happening to the person for the first and only time. In front of them, there's this sense of *presence* in the work that is a little dangerous. I reinvigorate old terms, like naturalism, but then I've also brought in different elements from around the art world—which has been done before, but never, I don't think, with the combination of Brechtian storytelling, direct address, and this extreme subjective naturalism as well.

In the interview, LeCompte describes her technical "interruptions" into the text of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* as "real," or at least "more real" than the more conventional, illusion-weaving first acts. Though she seems to abjure the illusion of realism, at least in a final accounting, she mobilizes *realness*--in the form of the actuality of technical intervention, the certain and evident interruptions--to destabilize the illusion. The naturalism she describes can be appreciated in the Group's imitative work, which depends, at least in *Hamlet*, not only on virtuosic mimicry but on the performers' overt disregard for the conventions of dramatic illusion--Scott Shepherd conversing easily with technical personnel, the smiling switcharoo Kate Valk makes between her portrayals of Ophelia and Gertrude as she makes no effort to disguise the artificiality of the theatrical situation. In fact, throughout the piece the Group's clear and good-humored acknowledgement of the weirdness of their actual task, in *Hamlet*, can be read as the sort of "extreme naturalism" that LeCompte describes.

The process and product of Wooster Group performers can be seen as a sort of inverse of the realist actor's mandate: in the place of an overwhelming concern for authenticity, one can see in their work a zealous appetite for precision, an effort toward verisimilitude that frankly admits its artificiality. Their attention to the minutiae of vocal production and (in the case of video sources) physicality, to timing and placement, generates from a very different project than a Stanislavskian or Method actor's--a devotion to exacting mimicry rather than producing authentic affect--but the two have in common an interest in an exacting representations of the minutiae of behavior. Realness, which for psychorealism might mean authenticity of staged emotion or an unpredictable response, means for the Wooster Group the realness of technical intervention, the frank admission of theater's artifice, and even the presentation of an exacting facsimile (that is, of course, a partial and creatively/strategically "broken" one) of the actual recorded performance. In the re-creation of audio and video recordings that permeate Wooster Group work, the task of mimicry can certainly render a "naturalistic" copy of the source material; in a telling example, Kate Valk tells an interviewer that, in *L.S.D.* (. . . *just the high points* . . .), when the Wooster Group "videotaped one of our rehearsals of *The Crucible* while we were tripping on acid, and then re-created that every night second by second" the product was naturalistic enough to read as completely unrehearsed: "Everyone thought it was improvised, but it was the most scored section [of the piece]!"

In *Route 1 and 9*, of course, Ron Vawter performed a mimicry of Fadiman after intensive work with the source video. In later works a similar tactic is employed when the performers use earpieces to receive audio as they concomitantly perform it. The technique is notable for what it makes possible: it allows LeCompte's performers to harness a number of

styles without aligning themselves with the ideologies that produce them--for example, Burton's volatile vitality produced without any requirement for the externalizing of internal "passion" in anyone's "bones." The practice results in a performance that *resembles* strong commitment to a certain style, but is not actually a commitment to anything other than copy-making--an endeavor which may certainly produce something in excess of the original: as LeCompte suggests to Kramer, "maybe something's revealed that's not in the original." I have already argued that using live actors in this sort of imitative project of re-presentation productively complicates an understanding of the live actor as a spontaneous and unpredictable human artist, an externalizer of internal passions; it also, however, can complicate and undermine the adopted style itself, even as the performers exploit that style's affinities.<sup>23</sup>

The Group's work is often figured as collage, a description that foregrounds the productive juxtaposition that Auslander calls "the essential structural principle of its work" (*From Acting* 39). Considering it, alternatively, in terms of copy-making or mimicry foregrounds the *process* through which the source performances (Like Fadiman's, like Burton's) are untethered from the logics and ideologies that produce them. The plurality of styles the Group is known for including in their work is made possible by an intensively imitative process--rather than amass a group of performers trained in the skills and styles she wants to play with, LeCompte makes use of her performers' imitative skill in order to *stage*

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<sup>23</sup> At an audience talk-back at the Los Angeles stop of the Group's 2010 touring revival of *North Atlantic*, LeCompte mentioned that the lead performer, Ari Fliakos, was hearing Vawter's previous performance of the part through an earpiece during the show. Vawter, a military veteran, had easy access to a sort of military affect--a rhythm and sound that LeCompte liked for the part, which she retained in Fliakos's performance by having him mimic Vawter vocally. While this example is not exactly a case of the Group unharnessing a style of performance from an ideology that produces it, I find it delightful that The Wooster Group mimics itself.

those styles without any particularly sincere or consistent ideological investment in their source. When they do train in those traditions or styles, it is to learn the vocabulary necessary for imitation rather than to foster a deep and lasting commitment to source tradition or practice.

Valk notes that

We would train ourselves, or commit to finding a way to do something by working at it, but actually lately we have brought in professionals to help us try to acquire specific kinds of expertise. For *Poor Theater* we did a lot of training with the Forsythe dancers Helen Eve Pickett and Natalie Thomas, and we had a Polish teacher for the Grotowski sections. For *To You, the Birdie!* [in which performers played a fast-paced round of badminton onstage] we had first a ping-pong master and then Chi Bing Wu, a badminton champion. I didn't end up playing badminton in the piece, but I did all the training in order to develop the vocabulary.

Performer Ari Fliakos describes their 2004 work *Poor Theater* as being both derived from Grotowski (the group worked with a video recording and the text of Grotowski's *Akropolis*) and unrecognizable as Grotowskian: "What we do is totally not Grotowski, and at the same time we absorbed something" (Kilpatrick). Fliakos marks the ambiguity that characterizes mimicry as a process and an organizing principle, especially when the reproduction is sometimes partial, fractured, or purposefully flawed, and sometimes masterful in its precision and accuracy: the product is, to use a figure of Richard Schechner's, both not Grotowski and not *not* Grotowski.

This ambiguity allows an impudent plurality of styles that both borrows from sources and knocks them off balance specifically by replicating their effects while it fails to subscribe to, or even spurns, their ideologies. Even the Wooster Group's lack of fidelity to the project of mimicry itself (as in the places in *Hamlet* where the virtuosity or accuracy of the re-enactment lapses, purposefully or no) keeps the imitative process itself, involved in so much of their

work, from being a stylistic or procedural commitment that is treated with absolute reverence and consistency. Combining styles which do not, according to their own logics, admit combination, often allows the Group to use, strategically, the effects of the very sort of acting they show themselves *not* to be doing. Auslander references this phenomenon, in part, when he argues that the group's performance style, "which at once evokes and critiques conventional acting, could be described as performance 'about' acting" (*From Acting* 41). In an interview with Auslander, the actor Willem Dafoe describes a similar effect achieved during the Group's performance of *LSD*, when he is seen onstage putting glycerin drops in his eyes before "crying": "[Using the drops] makes things vibrate a little more. You get your cake and eat it, too. You see the picture of the crying man, you hear the text, you see the whole thing before you" (42). Dafoe's imitation of "the crying man" reaps (some of) the effects, the pleasures of the very style it undermines through its frank use of stage artifice: part of its power comes from the compelling portrait of tears it paints even in the face of the fact of the glycerin. Kate Valk describes the same stage moment (with Vawter playing John Proctor rather than Dafoe) as "incredibly moving": "Even though there were a lot of devices that you could see were being manipulated, it felt more authentic and real to me [than a realistic representation]." In the case of Shepherd's Burton, the audience gets Burton and an undermining of Burton at the same time; the thrill of passionate acting that simultaneously unravels the idea of compelling acting as the product of internal passion.

Mediatization, in this work, often allows for the exposure of artifice that in turn makes for a richly polyvalent performance. The Wooster Group's use of mimicry is deeply dependent on and intertwined with their use of media, from source video to earpiece; especially in

*Hamlet*, media provide not just a vehicle, but the substance of a performance. The mediatized nature of their source materials does not only allow the performers to replay the target performances repeatedly in as they learn to reproduce them; it also, of course, allows them to shape and manipulate the source material. Even more fundamental in *Hamlet*, however, is the projection of the video on stage *while* it is being mirrored, the audible mix of the recorded audio and the live-produced speech of the Wooster Group actors, in each case recording and impersonation played and echoed simultaneously.

The importance I place on this simultaneity and intermixture of recorded and “live” performance can be understood through a similar-but-opposed example. Anna Deavere Smith calls herself, in an interview with *Los Angeles Times* reporter Steve Proffitt among other occasions, “a repeater rather than a mimic,” but her process is based on precision and iteration: she records the interviews she does with her subjects, and then attempts to reproduce that material, after intensive rehearsal with the recordings, with her own voice and body, *without* specifically trying to recreate an internal state similar to any one that might have inspired the original performance. Her work is also the work of copy-making, at least in the sense that it revolves around verisimilitude to a mediatized record; I do not mean to imply that Smith’s operating logic is the same as LeCompte or her company’s, or that they engage in precisely analogous processes, only that there are procedural similarities to the representations they produce, and a common focus on observable, imitable externalities of individuals’ performance rather than on intuiting or detecting those individuals’ motivations, subtexts or inner states. However, Smith does not give her eventual audience access to the interviewee’s recorded response in her final performance in the way the Wooster Group often includes the “source



material,” or some version or vestige of it, in their public performances. While Smith’s work is often considered virtuosic in its ability to present a wide range of subjects with apparent fidelity (although this is subjective judgment, and not necessarily consistent across all her characterizations), no sort of objective record of the “source material,” not even a vulnerable, inconstant and unreliable one, is accessible to the audience during her performance. One difference--again, among many--between Smith’s impersonation of Mrs. Soon Young Han, a Korean store owner in South Los Angeles and Scott Shepherd’s impersonation of Burton is that Shepherd’s work is constantly advertised as an overt act of mimicry because the source material on which it is based--the putative “real thing”--is always visible. This visibility constantly calls out the live actor’s mimicry as such, displays it explicitly as re-presentation of past work rather than a piece being fully executed “in the moment.” Both copy and source (in this case, a source that is itself a document of a prior performance) appear, pointedly making clear that even when Shepherd’s mimicry results, as I have argued, in a moment simultaneously legible as passionately vital and a calculating act of “mechanical” imitation, the nature of the work as artificial reproduction is never effaced or obscured.

To be sure, Smith’s performance in a single evening’s performance as multiple interviewees might also emphasize the artificiality of her process and the theatrical product; Smith’s theater is not illusory in the sense of conventional theatrical realism. However, the absence of the source--of the referent--means that her performance is never specifically held up against it in the way Shepherd’s performance of Burton is. In a very real way, it is the spectacular presence of the (altered, imperfect) *mediatized* source material that allows for the untethering of style from ideology I describe the Wooster Group accomplishing: rather like Willem Dafoe’s eye drops--

another plain and external technology--the presence of the recorded Burton (even, as I have said before, when Burton's presence is invoked through the erasure of his figure from the tape) is a constant reminder that however virtuosic the performance, it is an artificially-enabled reproduction and not an organic performance of character. To be clear: nowhere does Smith suggest her work as "organic"--in fact, in the introduction to *Fires In the Mirror* she writes somewhat dismissively of the psychological realism in which she was trained--but when her appearance on stage alone, as the audience's only access to the persona she is embodying, holds out the possibility for her work to be received as a transformation. In fact, other of Smith's words in that introduction suggest it as precisely that:

The act of speech is a physical act. It is powerful enough that it can create, with the rest of the body, a kind of cooperative dance. *That dance is a sketch of something that is inside a person and not fully revealed by the words alone.* I came to realize that if I were able to record part of the dance--that is, the spoken part--and reenact it, the rest of the body would follow. *I could then create the illusion of being another person by reenacting something they had said as they had said it.* (xxv, emphasis mine, but the last four words also italicized by Smith)

Smith, at least in this description, does hold out the possibility that her repeating will be, or lead to, a transformative act that grants her access to an *inside*, a precious core less visible than the externals she channels. Shepherd and the Wooster Group, however, constantly issue reminders that externals are the entire game, even when their exacting work with surfaces produces some of the pleasures of a more conventional representation--the "cake," in Dafoe's terms. It is the visible presence of the mediatized record, carrying as it does video's legacy as an evidentiary artifact, that makes the virtuosic imitation legible as artificial, even as the mimicry of passion is virtuosic enough to closely resemble Burton's supposedly authentic, passionate performance. Put another way, it is the presence of the mediatized record that reminds, constantly, that what

Shepherd is doing is imitation of another's affect, a near-mechanical exercise in copy-making, not the interpretive and volatile artistry Burton was seen as producing.

Even so, just as an exacting imitation of passion can be legible as the thing itself (or at least take on some of its qualities), Kate Valk suggests the audio and video records that act so significantly and visibly as templates in some Wooster Group works can actually produce some of the same effects, at least for the actor, that are so valorized by proponents of "organic" acting. According to Valk, though much of the Group's work may be quite specifically "scored" and require strict adherence to a pre-determined template that is a far cry from spontaneity, attention to the established "score" requires the sort of attention and readiness--sensitivity and agility--required by the "moment-to-moment" work prized by Hagen and Meisner:

A lot of how we work, with the in-ear tracks and the cues off the televisions, *keeps us responding in the moment, shortening the time between impulse and action*, so what we do is cued from this outside stimulus. And that can keep changing, so there is the potential for the unpredictable (emphasis added).

Meisner's exhortation not to do anything unless a scene partner "makes" you do it is meant to procure authentic response; not so the Wooster Group's work, of course, but Valk points out how a similar aim (that is, shortening the distance between "impulse" and action) might be a project of technical precision rather than one of stripping down to "honest" responses--and how the "other fellow," the outside stimulus, might be inorganic and mediatized, might present a challenge not because of its spontaneity and volatility but because of its capacity for *inflexibility*. The "tracks" Valk mentions bear resemblance to the "linear media" Saltz suggests mix badly with vulnerable, variable live theater. Those records' very lack of interactivity, their apparent reluctance to alter with altered circumstance, becomes productive of some of the same

conditionality that Saltz describes as the essential quality of live performance: Valk can't "autopilot" or "phone in" her performance precisely *because* it is cued, as she says, by outside stimulus which refuses to vary, and the relation between the live performers' work and the "linear" tracks that ground it requires constant attention, if not impulsive action.

### ***Cyborgs and posthumans on stage.***

My interest here revolves around the potential for machinic or digital precision and iterability to evoke some of the very qualities often considered the domain of elusive and unpredictable live moment and the spontaneous, unpredictable live actor. It seems possible that mischievous deployment of imitation and mimicry within a mediatized stage context might enact a hybridity capable of admitting, even celebrating, the post-human or the cyborg rather than insisting on the humanism that undergirds realism. Donna Haraway writes of the ways in which the category "human" must be fundamentally troubled in order to function within a contemporary context in which "there is no fundamental, ontological separation . . . of machine and organism, of technical and organic" (5). Hayles, for her part, considers the "human" as specifically a product of liberal humanism rather than as the ahistorical or universal figure Stanislavski (as well as his later American interpreters) seems to require, a product for whom "ownership of oneself," is both paramount and definitive: the "self" owned by the liberal subject supposedly arises in a state of nature prior to culture. However, if the self is culturally produced (Hayles specifically emphasizes its production through market forces), there is no natural self to own, and "the presumption that there is an agency, desire, or will belonging to the self and clearly distinguished from the 'wills of others' is undercut" (3). In terms of acting and artistry, then,

what was visible under a liberal humanist paradigm as the spontaneous creative inspiration enacted by a natural human self is effectively de-natured. The promise of the live, embodied human actor to act spontaneously and unpredictably in the vanishing moment loses its power to fascinate if that actor's action does not arise from an unfettered access to nature, or passion, or "organic" impulse--a studied stripping away of the impediments to self-revelation that reveals only honesty.

Both Hayles and Haraway make the celebrated human difficult to locate, at the very least, and so their theories have telling consequences for any humanist conception of the artist/actor. Hayles, tellingly, begins her consideration of the posthuman by taking an extended look at the Turing test, in which a (human) judge interacts via a terminal with one human and one machine. If, in the course of a conversation explicitly mediated by terminals and screens, the judge cannot tell the machine from the human, the machine is said to have passed the test--Hayles's words: "The other [non-human] entity wants to mislead you. He/She/It will try to reproduce through the words that appear on your terminal the characteristics of the other entity" (xi). Alan Turing called the test "The Imitation Game," arguing that the question of whether or not machines can think was imprecise and eventually meaningless, and that the meaningful question was whether machines could function in a manner which rendered them indistinguishable (and therefore indistinct) from humans. Hayles points out that Turing's test distinguishes between the enacted body, "present in the flesh on one side of the computer screen, and the represented body, produced through the verbal and semiotic markers constituting it in an electronic environment." More importantly, however,

The very existence of the test, however, implies that you may also make the wrong choice. Thus the test functions to create the *possibility* of a

disjunction between the enacted and represented bodies, regardless of what choice you make. What the Turing test ‘proves’ is that the overlay between the enacted and the represented bodies is no longer a natural inevitability, but a contingent production, mediated by a technology that has become so entwined with the production of identity that it can no longer meaningfully be separated from the human subject (xiii, emphasis mine).

Live, embodied performance, then, has already at least partially collapsed into its other: the existence of the test, as Hayles emphasizes, creates such a disjunction as already possible. On one hand, then, the game itself suggests that *acting*--strategic performance of an assumed identity, let's say--is not the special province of humans, since a machine that could adequately imitate human response--one that could “act” sufficiently natural--would be indistinguishable from its putative opposite, the human being, in somewhat the same way I suggest Scott Shepherd's external mimicry is at times indistinguishable from Burton's supposed internal passion. Additionally, however, it suggests that the capability of machines to impersonate humanity is not the futuristic province of complex androids inventors have yet to innovate. Rather, once the question has been posed, the possibility for impersonation through the mediating terminal exists.

Even more specifically, however, Hayles's reading of the Turing test suggests that the relationship between model/original and copy is not only not “truthful,” as in the traditional conception of mimesis, but not *functional*, not correlative in the way it is often presumed to be. Hayles's “overlay” between the enacted and the represented body, once considered natural and inevitable but exposed in a posthuman context as contingently produced and mediated by technology, might be another way to regard the relationship between model and copy, the real and the representation, fundamental to mimesis. In the paradigm Hayles describes, not only is

the link between the two not affirmed by truth and nature, the two cannot be certain to coincide at all. That is, once you cannot know what is on the other side of the Turing test--once the possibility exists that you've been duped, and the existence of the game itself marks the possibility of your failure--both the separation and the correspondence between the thing itself and its representation erodes from inevitability into contingency and uncertainty. To risk oversimplification, on the internet, you can't know anyone *isn't* an impersonating dog, or a bot, or a program.<sup>24</sup> The potential for impersonation, one of the fundamental tasks of acting, has long been one of the larger bugaboos of a digital, mediatized world. Kate Valk perhaps references a similar phenomenon more whimsically when she recounts that "Somebody once said to us, 'The microphones and the TVs are inhuman!' But they seem so human to me. It's human to make them part of you and to dance with them—why keep that out of the theater?"

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<sup>24</sup> The fiction writer Jonathan Lethem recently offered an update to the dog joke in a short story: "If 'on the Internet nobody knows you're a dog' . . . then an even more grievous fear may be the unspoken one: 'On the Internet, nobody knows how many dogs there are'" (429). That is, not only must you be unsure regarding the proffered versus actual pedigree of any user you may encounter, but you cannot be sure how many among them are actually the *same* user or body of users, human or no, posing as separate and individual--a dilemma which may have more unsettling implications.

## ***CHAPTER TWO: CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION OF AUTHENTICITY ON REALITY TV***

### ***Introduction.***

This chapter begins with a consideration of the reality show *The Hills*, a particularly generically hybrid program that flaunts its questionable authenticity while relying on at least some of the markers that distinguish reality programming from more traditional, fictional televisual genres. The show largely abandons any sign of verité in favor of lush photography, precise (likely rehearsed) staging, and instances of unconvincingly pat dialogue and faux-happenstance, but it still remains tethered, albeit somewhat uneasily, to a “reality” genre that promises to showcase actual people and events rather than stage rehearsed and artificial representations of “real life.” I use this unusually complex instance of reality TV a kind of limit case: undeniably manipulated, forcibly bent to shape a cogent and recognizable narrative, subject even to casting, writing, and direction, this show, like the rest of its genre, still depends on gestures toward the real, gestures which attempt to anchor reality shows to the thing they infelicitously promise: *real life* itself, however manicured, in the place of the categorically false counterfeit of fictional entertainment.

I go on to discuss the negotiation of this paradox by audiences, borrowing (and then complicating) Randall Rose and Stacy Wood’s notion of a negotiated, contingent authenticity for reality TV products, one that depends on audiences to take part in the work of reconciling the shows’ artificiality with its generic promise of something like bare actuality. Authenticity, Rose and Wood argue, does not depend on effacing the artificial manipulations that create the shows,



but on audiences co-producing authenticity through taking an active part, alongside producers and performers, in constructing a balance between the shows' seemingly opposing characteristics--their concomitant realness and fakeness. After using Rose and Wood's model to examine how audiences might experience this kind of enthusiastic, co-operative engagement as pleasurable, I propose that authenticity, however negotiated or contingent, might not always be the goal of the participatory viewing strategies audiences seem to enjoy. For some viewers, moments of unbelievability, of rupture or failure, might not be something to reconcile or efface, but rather to highlight; they might be the shows' most rich and exciting moments, and audiences' engagement might not serve solely to locate or produce authenticity, but to question it.

While some, including the critic Mark Andrejevic, have argued that savvy viewers who "love to hate" reality TV are reifying a binary between "fake" and "real" by making a point of calling out gaffes, continuity errors, or unbelievable moments within the shows, I argue that the excitement with which such viewers pounce on seeming moments of exception--or the extent to which they roll their eyes at the shows' less successful impersonations of spontaneity and sincerity--might signal not dependence on that binary, but an interest in destabilizing it. The same "mistakes" or moments of failure that reveal the shows' heavy construction and manipulation tacitly bring into question *all* moments in the show, including the more successful or less objectionable moments that do not so easily reveal their "fakeness." The gotcha moments that some viewers love to uncover suggest not only reality TV's failure to work the illusion of realness completely; they also present the likelihood that *other* moments, those without visible gaffes or errors, may be not be called out as fake--may be apprehended as real, or real enough to "pass"--despite the genre's endemic commitment to manipulation of the real. The result is a

pleasurable flirtation, on the part of audiences, with the idea that this binary may be radically unstable; that subject can never be sure what is staged, or the extent to which it has been, or if there is a sure and certain difference between what appears spontaneous and what has been staged or rehearsed, between the authentic and the artificial.

In the next section, I look at television's historical relationship with intimacy and immediacy and the curious relationship with liveness and realness granted by that relationship; television is understood to grant access to the real even as it mediates the real it renders into representation. While it is somewhat facile to suggest that *all* television is, in fact, "reality" TV, this genre certainly makes special use of the medium's similarly paradoxical commitments to immediacy, intimacy and liveness, on one hand, and mediatization, artifice, and construction on the other. I illustrate this relationship through a reading of an episode from the thirteenth season of *The Bachelor*, in which some kind of authentic romantic feeling is ostensibly performed by real people in a "real" (although terrifically, even unbelievably artificial) romantic relationship, one to which viewers are given spectacularly intimate access (all the more titillating because the subjects are "real") through the televisual medium. Using Misha Kavka's ideas about the performativity of affect in "true-love" television, I investigate the ways in which participants are called on to certify their un-prove-able affective states through word and action, in the process potentially *creating*, through performance, the affect they are supposedly revealing. The idea of performative affect further muddies a clean distinction between "real" and "fake," this time in terms of feeling: when going through the repertoires of courtship in a setting constructed to engender romance brings romantic feeling into being, performances cannot satisfactorily be judged "real" or "fake," sincere or false, authentic or merely a show.

From here, the chapter moves to a brief consideration of the genre's resonances with and significant differences from realism, and the implications of these for authentic performances of self. Drawing on both reality television criticism and the acting theories of Stanislavski, I examine the appearance of personal authenticity--being "real"--as a performance strategy, a purposeful cultivation that claims to reveal what is authentic through artificial means. The manipulations of reality television production processes, as well as the strategies of its individual performers, bear a resemblance to Stanislavski's actor in their attempt to reveal something authentic, or effectively--legibly--so, through artificial means: practical strategies for appearing "natural," fabrications or processes that enhance realness, make it visible, or even claim to bring it into being. I also touch on the sort of "histrionic," over-wrought performances that Stanislavski disparages but on which reality TV, for all its debt to authenticity and realness, seems to depend.

In the conclusion to the chapter, I emphasize the work reality television and its viewers do toward undermining the stability of categories like "real" and "false" (staged and spontaneous, authentic and inauthentic) as useful, exciting, and pleasurable rather than damaging, silly, or regrettable. Rather than the cheap, empty showmanship described by the critics who most vociferously bemoan the genre's vapidness and disingenuous promise of authenticity, I see the performances of questionable reality fundamental to this genre as promoting an understanding of realness as a negotiable quality, not directly and fundamentally opposed to performance, artifice, and the effects of media and manipulation. My hope is that this might allow for a popular understanding of a "real" and valuable performance of selfhood that does not lose its value or power when revealed as overwhelmingly citational. From this

perspective, a “scripted” existence or a highly constructed role or persona might still have considerable value, utility, and agency in spite of a deep imbrication with the artificial that reveal it as other than original and authentic. Rather than a regrettable and overwhelming pollution, I see see potential in this proliferation of pretense: reveling in the co-mingling of the real and its various others that reality TV exemplifies allows for an exciting liminality, one that can productively complicate the notion and performance of realness.

***“Scripted reality.”***

My first experience with MTV’s show *The Hills* occurred by chance. While channel-surfing, I saw on the screen a beautifully lit, tightly framed scene on a beach—one which appeared impossible to shoot without explicit direction and rehearsal, including reverse angle shots that seemed to require multiple takes—of a young couple arranged picturesquely on a beach, engaged in a marriage proposal. They were, however, using language that seemed unlikely to have been scripted: simultaneously naturalistic and banal, and oddly lacking in spontaneity for something that seemed too sloppy to be pre-written:

*CUT TO: Santa Barbara*

*Heidi & Spencer are lying by the beach.*

Spencer: Heidi, in all seriousness . . . you’re pretty much the most amazing human I’ve ever met in my whole life. And it’s so real and every single day I’m with you, I really am happier every day and I . . . it’s so real that every time I wake up you next to me [sic], it’s like ‘Ah! You’re there! Yay! You’re still there!’ I want to spend the rest of my life with you so I got this for you. (*Shows her the ring*)

Heidi: I love you.

Spencer: I love you more. I really do.

Heidi: I don't think so.

Spencer: I don't even know what hand the ring goes on so...you can...*(She puts it on)* It's a little big I'm sure because nobody has cutest hands as you [sic]. *(She kisses him)*

Heidi: I love you more than anything. When people told me 'don't be with him' I was just like 'You obviously don't know him because he's the most amazing guy I've ever met in my life.' And I never had a relationship like this. It's so fun and it's so everything and you're always there and I know for my whole life, that you'll always be there and I know that you're the most loyal, amazing, loving, everything person and I love you more than anything in the whole world. ("Big Girls Don't Cry")

I kept watching until the end of the episode, entranced by my inability to adequately classify or account for the program. The dialogue sounded too un-styled to be scripted, as it would be in a "regular," fictional television show about California's beautiful people (think *Melrose Place*), but neither did it seem to announce itself as reality television. It was lacking familiar reality television conventions, like confessional address to the camera, an overt organizing principle (as in a competition of some sort or unusual but explicit premise), or participants who explicitly reference the show in which they participate. Even more confusingly, it did not look or sound like reality television; it was beautifully presented, well lit, with excellent sound and an expensive elegance (at least visually, the dialogue notwithstanding) that most reality shows never manage. The show's strange mix of content and form--the fact that it looked like *Melrose Place* but featured dialogue that resembled the least sophisticated mumblecore productions--seemed distinctly uncanny, impossible to place within the field of mass-market television products known to me, the vast majority of which are immediately classifiable variations on known entities, their fictionality or status as "reality-based" made clear by the appropriate generic conventions and signals.

Nicholas Ridout points out that audiences

know who we expect to see on stage. We expect to see actors. This needs saying: we do not even expect to see human beings, in all their diversity, but, as their representatives, a kind of group apart, more beautiful perhaps, more agile, more powerful and subtle of voice. Creatures who have been chosen on the basis of some initially desirable attributes, which they have subsequently honed and refined by means of professional training. So when we get something else, it appears as an anomaly, and a worrying one at that. (97-8)

Ridout's larger argument concerns theater, but the expectations he characterizes apply, although with a difference, to film and television: when those media are put in service of entertainment narratives, fictionality and theatricality--and, concomitantly, *acting*--is the norm, one from which the nonfictional must differentiate itself. Documentary and reality television define themselves in opposition to fictional narratives, seeking truth-value for their products. Reality television, in particular, bases its generic identity on not employing the "group apart" Ridout references but supposedly ordinary people, if never human beings in "all their diversity." Reality TV often specifically lacks diversity, featuring the white, the beautiful, the straight, the young, and the normative disproportionately, but the genre promises that they are not actors, are not trained in the presentation of character according to theatrical convention. However, just as theatrical performance signals to an audience a form (and within that form, often, a genre) that informs their expectations (of acting, of theatricality), reality television is also marked by conventions which signal audience expectation. Confusion in the presentation of the conventions through which reality TV announces itself to an audience can constitute the same sort of worrying anomaly referenced by Ridout, or at least did so for me.

It turns out that *The Hills*--now out of production after six seasons--fits somewhat uncomfortably within the genre of reality television. During the first four seasons it followed

young, beautiful, Californian Lauren Conrad and a group of her friends and co-workers (all young, almost exclusively white, attractive, and apparently extraordinarily wealthy) through the drama of their daily lives in Los Angeles (after the fourth season, Conrad left the show, replaced by high school nemesis and *Laguna Beach*<sup>25</sup> reality co-star Kristin Cavallari). Per reality television convention, the dialogue within the show is apparently unscripted though the conversations often seem contrived, and its participants are identified using their actual names. As I noted earlier, however, many other hallmarks of the genre are missing. The product lacks the explicit goal or premise common to reality television shows like *Survivor* (a competition), *The Real World* (in which strangers agree to live together and be surveilled), either of which would make it clearly legible as reality programming. There is no reference within the show to the existence of the show itself—neither to the fact that recording is occurring nor to the show’s performers’ status as reality television stars.<sup>26</sup> An introduction to the episode and segues between subplots are provided by Conrad (and later Cavallari) via voice over, just as they are by the female main characters on some of the conventional fictional shows *The Hills* visually resembles (*Grey’s Anatomy*, *Sex In The City*). And, of course, the look of the show, particularly the camerawork, is smooth and beautiful, remarkably unlike what appears on most reality television shows. It is well lit and well framed, employing over-the-shoulder shots impossible to achieve without detailed camera and subject placement (and/or multiple takes), and rarely appears to

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<sup>25</sup> *Laguna Beach* preceded *The Hills* and displayed a very similar aesthetic; though putatively unrehearsed, the show is beautifully shot. A number of the performers in *Laguna Beach* appear in *The Hills*, most notably protagonists Conrad and Cavallari.

<sup>26</sup> Lauren Conrad debuted a line of her own clothing during the third season, but no mention was made on the show of the undertaking, or of why an aspiring designer granted such an opportunity would continue to work as an intern at a magazine, as Conrad did during the season in question, while managing a line of her own products and performing on television besides.

suffer from the compromises that real-time taping of unrehearsed events necessitates (available lighting, shaky Steadicam, dodgy sound). In a *Rolling Stone* cover story on the show, writer Jason Gay described the show's unusual beauty:

For starters, it's gorgeous. Most reality TV looks like cheap slop, but *The Hills* resembles a movie — it's filmed with digital cameras on tripods, with elegant evening scenes shot in low light. When its aerial cameras swoop down for a dreamy view of Sunset Boulevard twinkling at dusk, L.A. has never appeared more desirable. Much of *The Hills'* look is credited to Hisham Abed, a young director of production who worked on the show's first season and was also responsible for the golden tint of *Laguna Beach*. Abed says he based *The Hills'* cool-evening look on the films of Michael Mann. "I like *Heat*," Abed says. "We were trying to emulate the look of film on television."

Where some reality television products are lent a measure of verité by their shaky cameras and inconsistent audio, *The Hills* aligns itself, at least visually, with the beauty and artifice associated with more conventional, fictional televisual entertainments, or even with film. The resulting mixed signals render it a curious product within the milieu of reality television: if the genre, generally, is caught in a tension between an actuality that grounds its claim to the real and the manipulation that secures its station as a salable entertainment product, this particular show seems even more deeply contradictory than the average. Even if we think we know what to expect from reality TV, as Ridout says we do of theater, *The Hills* has the potential to upset those expectations.

Though shows that share *The Hills* "mixed signals" are now more common, at the time when I discovered it, the show represented something of a new, hybrid genre, one which places unscripted content and individuals using their own names and identities inside such a glossy and gorgeous form that it is difficult to accept the finished product as anything other than staged. The program is sometimes described, popularly, as "scripted



reality” (potentially misleading, considering that the--often awkwardly--improvised dialogue itself is one of the more obvious flags that the show is not actually the primetime soap that it so resembles). “Scripted reality” products like *The Hills*--of which there are now more than a few, most of them MTV products--offer complex pleasures to viewers who are presumably less consternated than I was by its admixture of “reality television” and highly constructed, even fantastic soap opera. Instead, it appears that this hybrid product (“scripted reality”) offers complex pleasures to viewers comfortable with its hybridity.

“Reality television” as a category, of course, is something of an admixture itself; as I mentioned earlier, it forms a genre of television simultaneously dependent on its claim on actuality and authenticity (“real” people, “real” events; the suggestion of spontaneous action and unrehearsed, unplanned events) and on the artificial manipulation necessary to create a marketable product (including careful casting, editing, positioning, marketing and framing). To ask whether or not *The Hills* is scripted--to attempt to pin down its genre commitments--is to return to a slightly more specific version of a hackneyed and reductive question: how “real” is reality television? It might be more productive to ask why it would matter (if the show is scripted and rehearsed), and what is at stake in determining its relationship with authenticity, particularly for viewers, and what sorts of performances or gestures would help it qualify as “real” in the midst of its patent artificiality. It is these questions and these “stakes” that this chapter investigates, particularly the complex pleasures and possibilities that reality TV’s strange relationship with realness might potentiate.

### ***Construction, genre, and paradox.***

In the introduction to the anthology *Reality Squared*, James Friedman writes that “Few people confuse ‘reality-based’ programming with a representation of reality.” He quotes Los Angeles Times critic Brian Lowry’s comment that

Someone needs to come up with a better name for the stuff than ‘reality’ programming.<sup>27</sup> Reality? Please. No one in my reality has ever suggested I eat larvae or be locked in a house for 90 days without contacting the outside world.  
(8)

This is the one of the most basic paradoxes of reality television: the fact that the highly engineered, deeply manipulated scenarios common to the shows disrupt their claims to showcase that which stands in opposition to fictional narrative entertainment: though supposedly anything can happen on a reality television show—in contrast to the rehearsed inevitability of a scripted drama—they are overwhelmingly predictable. The shows feature familiar narratives as producers and editors go to great lengths to predicate, influence, control and shape the action. Participants, too, may be eager to adopt archetypal and familiar personae, performing not only the inevitable citationality of behavior but a more specific willingness to fit a predetermined role the shows’ drama. If such influence is not exactly scripting, it is certainly not unrelated.

It is this central tension, between the promised actuality, sincerity and spontaneity of players’ behavior and the apparent, if de-emphasized, practices of manipulation that guide, style,

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, Lowry’s comment nearly echoes one made by Margaret Mead in discussing 1973’s *An American Family*, sometimes credited as the first reality television experience. Mead suggested that a new “name” was needed not because the events depicted weren’t representative of reality, but because the product seemed to exist in a liminal space between documentary and entertainment. For a discussion of this generic hybridity (which certainly acknowledges that “documentary” and “entertainment” are not mutually exclusive), see Susan Murray’s, “*I Think We Need A New Name For It*”, the title of which quotes Mead directly.

and even provoke that behavior, that begs the common question of whether reality television deserves the name of the real. The question itself seems prompted to produce a savvy and knowing response; it is unlikely that any viewer or critic is entirely ignorant of the way show producers affect and even effect reality show content, or that they cannot appreciate the way the tightly constructed shows differ from an unedited, unconstructed feed of video surveillance. Friedman points out that all televisual content predicated on representing actual events is subject to some degree of significant construction, including supposedly objective televisual journalism; he notes that even the coverage of a presidential debate--a hallowed endeavor for those who would practice objectivity in reporting or representation--inevitably becomes subjective as it is rendered into the televisual:

Where one network might cut to a reaction shot, the other might stay focused on a speaker. The reaction could certainly influence the viewers' evaluation of the performers and therefore alter their experience of the debate. This is not to say, however, that we must dismiss the reality depicted in the representation of the debate. Accepting that television can at best present *a* version of reality is the first step in the exploration of the medium's presentation of real events. (10)

Friedman points out the televisual as a form has always given access only to a version or representation of reality, not to the thing itself, while still ascribing value to the subjective reality so presented. In this sense, "reality" television represents another continuation of the promise of the televisual more generally: to provide access to the actual via some specific channel [no pun], through a medium that cannot efface its subjectivity or artifice no matter how sincere its promise to deliver a clear-eyed representation. Perhaps it is no accident that the advent of reality television, with all the complexity it brings to notions of realness, roughly coincides with a growing popular understanding of broadcast journalism, previously considered a bastion of objectivity, as a subjective and strategic enterprise with a mandate to reinforce ideology. Writing

not specifically about news programming but about the introduction of a “commodity real” fetishized not only by reality TV, but by multiple types of factual programming, the critic John Corner has described a contemporary “postdocumentary” context, influenced by a “new ecology of the factual” which upsets prior, albeit tenuous, generic distinctions regarding the differing mandates of documentary and entertainment (55, 62). Corner implies that all sorts of factual programming are increasingly unmoored from the categorical distinctions that might have separated them in the past, as elements of documentary look-and-feel are leveraged by diverse styles of entertainment. Fictional programming, too, is increasingly “borrowing” visual and other vocabularies associated with reality television: the “confessionals” of situation comedies *The Office* and *Modern Family* rely on a tacit understanding of the genre that is rarely referenced directly, and the muted “shaky cam” (handheld Steadicam work, a staple of reality TV) of *Law & Order* and *30 Rock* also quietly evoke reality television’s promise of behind-the-scenes access and unpredictable events, in that hand-held cameras are agile and mobile enough to cope with the unpredictability of unexpected events in a way that tripod-mounted cameras (better suited for rehearsed and controlled content) cannot. Though these shows are scripted and rehearsed in a traditional manner, they mobilize the visual rhetoric of reality TV to suggest its flavor anyhow, further blurring the codes that communicate genre expectation and work to segregate scripted and rehearsed fictional programming from putatively unpredictable reality TV.

These shows are borrowing the signs and marks of reality TV, gestures the genre itself stages in order to firm up its embattled claim on authenticity. Reality TV constantly contends with the paradox created by its concomitant dependence on and obvious flouting of something like unvarnished reality; precisely because its claim to authenticity is always jeopardized by its

clear manipulation of content, the genre repeatedly delivers the signs and marks of intimacy (the access granted into participants' bedrooms, domestic disputes or intimate conversations) and spontaneity (the lack of explicit rehearsal and proscribed dialogue, the potential for unexpected occurrences, the available light shooting or occasionally poor audio that signals a lack of staging). Reality TV must stage *enough* gestures toward authenticity to differentiate it from conventional fictional programming, and enough intimate access to "real" people to be titillating. When manipulation of actual subjects and circumstances hits a sweet spot between the ugly graininess and interminable minutiae of a security camera and the slick production and admittedly fictional premise of a soap opera, reality television manages, though does not resolve, its eponymous paradox.

In a 2005 study titled "Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity Through Reality Television," researchers Randall Rose and Stacy Wood confronted this apparent paradox, noting that the respondents in their study understood reality television as the contradictory product its name implies: an alchemy of "found" actuality ("reality") and produced artificiality ("television"). Rather than suggesting a fully docile reality television viewer easily duped into accepting an overtly managed and produced reality as a *found* reality—in their own words, viewers who "trick themselves into a false perception of the program as un-produced ('life unscripted,' as one cable channel touts)"—Rose and Wood describe a viewer who co-produces the program's "reality," suggesting a model in which authenticity does not reside in the product consumed so much as it is co-produced by viewers' negotiation of the "paradox" of reality television's simultaneous claim on actuality and obvious construction (292). Rose and Wood's model posits an active, productive, even savvy user/consumer rather than a passive one to whom

the significant evidence of construction is somehow transparent or invisible. It also suggests that the paradox described is, rather than simply a hurdle to be overcome (or disguised), fundamentally necessary to viewer activity: the act of negotiation is an important job of the viewer, active and potentially pleasurable, to the extent that it resolves the supposedly troubling paradox into a more easily consumed picture of authenticity, however contingent or negotiated. Such a model appreciates the reality television situation as one of complex tensions rather than simple compliance. Rather than suggest viewers' consumption of reality television as merely a docile suspension of disbelief, Rose and Woods' viewers assume a productive role in negotiating the paradox. Where other critics and scholars have characterized voyeurism as a chief appeal of reality TV, Rose and Wood focus on this co-production as, if not itself pleasurable, a pre-condition for enjoyment; they report that viewers engage in this negotiation in order to "accept or assimilate the paradox, thereby negotiating a satisfying feeling of authenticity" (290).

Although it makes other claims as well, Rose and Wood's work quantifies the obvious: viewers, even those who readily enjoy reality TV, do not perceive it as unvarnished "reality." More interesting is their implication that the "paradox" of reality television is not a gap in its logic but a constitutive and necessary part of its appeal: Rose and Wood do not strongly differentiate between the work of negotiation and co-production of authenticity by viewers, and its pleasurable consumption of it. *The Hills*, however, might make a challenging case study for Rose and Wood's argument. Its disregard for most of reality television's conventions makes it less than fully legible as reality TV, meaning that the paradox it presents might be particularly challenging to resolve. Most obviously problematic is its lush, filmic beauty, which potentially overwhelms viewers with visibly intricate artifice which makes authenticity difficult to negotiate

for the show, or at least which renders *The Hills*' status as "reality" programming somewhat suspect.

The show, however, seems not to expend much energy attempting to safeguard that status, but rather flaunts the extravagant and manipulative production values that mark it as flagrantly and highly produced. The show's gorgeous, *Melrose Place* look is coupled with dialogue that manages to be terribly stilted even while it exhibits a naturalistic lack of polish, as in the proposal scene cited at the beginning of this chapter. Such contrived language, as well as the show's credulity-destroying instances of supposed happenstance (nemeses and exes, in particular, seem to run into each other unexpectedly with surprising frequency), simultaneously separate it both from the real, since its clear affectation suggests it as overwhelmingly styled and artificial, and from realism, since the clunkiness of its obvious artifice excludes it. In a particularly telling moment, during an episode of *The Hills* in which star Lauren Conrad was traveling abroad, a performer uses a co-worker's passing reference to CERN's Large Hadron Collider particle accelerator--and its hypothetical potential to create a black hole--to return conversation to the social world of the show by saying, "Isn't it weird how all this [potential Armageddon] is happening while Lauren's gone?" ("When Lauren's Away . . .") The segue is laughably artificial--unnatural, suggestive of, if not scripting, at least forced exposition--but despite the artificiality that makes it, arguably, "bad" reality television for those invested in the performance or appearance of authenticity, it certainly does not resemble *good* artifice, or finely rendered illusion. The negotiation of authenticity seems like a particularly tall order for a show, like *The Hills*, which all but trumpets its clear construction to its audience.

Although the show was quite popular during its run, it did not entirely escape the scorn and opprobrium one might imagine being levied against reality television that exposes itself as “too fake”; since its debut the show contended with accusations of falsity or scriptedness that threw its status as “reality” programming into question. In a representative instance, the New York Post’s *Page Six* reported in August of 2007 that the crew of *The Hills* were observed setting up elaborate lights and “cameras everywhere” in a Manhattan restaurant, where they proceeded to “take five takes of Lauren Conrad ordering dinner.” The piece was published under the somewhat accusatory headline “Not Really Real,” but also mentioned that the *Page Six* writers had “had our doubts for some time” regarding the show’s rightful claim to be “reality television.” Throughout the blogosphere, reactions to this event and other comparable reports were largely similar: tepid outrage, or at least schadenfreude, mixed with admissions that certain events or plot points within the show were so clearly contrived that evidence of this sort was hardly a cause for indignation. After a similar exposé, a headline from a celebrity gossip blog read, “So *The Hills* is Sort of Scripted ... Does Anyone Care?” [TheHollywoodGossip.com]).

Following the restaurant incident and a few other reports or observances of apparent disingenuousness (including “nailpolishgate,” in which a break in continuity was exposed by a sudden change in Conrad’s nail polish in the middle of an evening out), Conrad spoke out in *Entertainment Weekly* about the nature of the show’s construction:

[W]hen people started picking out these very little things, it was weird to me because anyone who has worked on a reality show knows how they're filmed. We're not filming *The Truman Show*, we don't have cameras set up all around our apartment, and they're not with us 24/7. Basically what they're doing is taking our lives and telling a story. For example, the night [of the nail-polish incident, while on a date with model Gavin], the cameras stopped rolling, and I went out to a club with [Gavin]. I went home and called someone [friend Brody Jenner], and the next day talked about it. [MTV] was like, Okay, well, we need to get that on tape,



and since they're trying to tell a story the right way, I basically had to go and call [Brody] again, have the exact same conversation on camera. I mean, it's not lying to anyone, it's telling what really happened, but it's just the way they film reality shows. (Soll, brackets preserved from original)

Rather in accordance with Conrad's assertion that this is "just how they film reality shows," evidence of this kind of manipulation became something of a non-event. The show's popularity did not nosedive when attention was thrown on the significantly manipulative practices that produce it. Moreover, Conrad's defense of *The Hills* explains the circumstances of its occurrence in a way that takes for granted a knowing viewership like the one Rose and Wood describe: savvy and literate regarding the conventions of reality television and its contradictory attributes rather than naïve and duped by the slight-of-hand of powerful producers. Rose and Wood describe their viewers as adept at reconciling reality television's reliance on actual events and people and its pseudo-secret manipulation at the hands of producers:

Viewers who found the programming most satisfyingly authentic were those who reveled in the contradictory aspects of the genre. They experienced contradiction as resonant and engaging, rather than as bewildering or confusing . . . Viewers of reality television need not find authenticity embedded in the programming text but rather co-produce it . . . [they] endow their reality television viewing experience with authenticity through a reflexive process of paradox negotiation. (294-5)

The researchers' subjects--like "Larry," below--sound something like Lauren Conrad in their clear understanding that successful reality television involves a balance between fidelity to actual events and manipulative construction:

Larry: I think you have to have it edited, produced, and some stuff left out. I'm sure sometimes people don't always get a fair shake. But, I feel like that's the best way it could be done though, because nobody is going to watch 24/7. If you see just an hour a week of somebody's life, that could be more exciting than seeing three days at a time in real time. (292)

This viewer, perhaps tellingly, refers to the more common (and arguably lesser) interventions of editing captured content rather than the explicit staging or re-staging of events for the camera, but his attitude is of the same sort that makes an acceptance of *The Hills*'s staged phone call acceptable: in Conrad's words, "it's not lying to anyone, it's telling what really happened," even if that *what* is inevitably influenced, even largely constituted, by the producers' telling of it. Distinctions between degrees of severity in "the way" outcomes are manipulated—more subtly, by editing captured video with an eye toward certain effects, or more overtly, by re-enacting or even procuring important events—may be less important than the overwhelming fact that they *are* manipulated, and that, as Rose and Wood suggest, audiences seem able, even pleased, to cope with that manipulation.

In order to contextualize this audience reaction historically, one might contrast this popular reaction (or lack thereof) to evidence of scriptedness and manipulation with the reaction that followed revelations of the quiz show scandals of the 1950s, in which significant meddling by producers was seen not as harmless, but outrageous, and enough to render the shows fraudulent. A comparison with the quiz show scandals may be more precisely apt for those reality shows that are similarly framed around a game or contest; for game-based shows, the outcome of the competition around which the show is putatively centered can be seen to work as a sort of litmus test of the proceeding's "realness," a test that a show like *The Hills* does not provide. Game-based shows, after all, are perceived to progress according to rules and rituals, which suggest limits for the tampering producers may engage in. Producers may be free to choose contestants, edit the proceedings, and adjust wardrobe, for example, but, at least in theory, the sort of overt meddling by producers that caused the quiz show scandals—directing

the action by providing information to certain contestants ahead of time, attempting to secure a ratings-worthy outcome by direct means rather than allowing the game to proceed “naturally” or spontaneously—is unsportsmanlike, even fraudulent. Because shows like *The Bachelor*, *The Apprentice*, *Top Chef* and *Project Runway* are contests, there is a more explicit expectation of fairness, however loosely defined, which may inform how much and which kinds of manipulation are “fair game” and which other manipulations sully the results. While the separation between acceptable and overly intrusive producer (or editor) manipulation of content is at best a floating mark in reality television, shows that involve an explicit contest are built around a framework that offers a model for which types of manipulations and pressures work to discount realness and which are considered superficial. Because of this, can contest-based shows provide a particularly useful crucible for examining where realness is seen to inhere in reality television--or at least for interrogating the polyvalent relationship the genre has with the notion.

By way of example: during the thirteenth season of the reality television show *The Bachelor*, rumors abounded that the titular bachelor, Jason Mesnick, so preferred one contestant, Molly Malaney, from the outset of the season that producers, fearing the show would suffer from a lack of suspense if Mesnick’s choice was too apparent early on, directed him to spread his affections around. In the final episode, when only two contestants remained, Mesnick chose contestant another bachelorette-contestant, Melissa Rycroft, over Malaney, and proposed to Rycroft in the season finale. In what was advertised as a shocking surprise move, he returned to network television six weeks later, in a post-season television special, to break off the engagement with Rycroft on camera and reconnect with Malaney. The move prompted further media speculation regarding producer influence on Mesnick’s supposedly heartfelt decisions: in

addition to suspicions that Mesnick had been directed by producers *not* to choose Malaney though he preferred her from the outset, rumors arose that producers had directed him to choose Rycroft with the understanding that he would, in a highly publicized reversal, jilt her for Malaney in a scandalous, ratings-grabbing (live) upset. The post-season television special in which Mesnick transferred his affections from Rycroft to Malaney was indeed a popular success, and appeared questionable enough that producer Mike Fleiss went on record to deny rumors that the change of heart was staged. An Associated Press story quoted Fleiss as asserting that producers had “zero influence” on Mesnick’s decision: “The great thing about unscripted television is that it’s unpredictable, and that’s what this was,” he said of Mesnick’s decision to separate from Rycroft and rekindle his romance with Malaney. “It caught us off guard. It caught the viewers off guard” (Carlson). While Fleiss’s use of the term “scripted television” is perhaps telling, his message was unequivocal: Mesnick’s actions were sincere, or at least uninfluenced by producers. Fleiss’s words imply that for producers to have intervened in this matter of the heart--for them to privilege one contestant over another, or for them to have pre-determined the winner of the contest--is indeed fakery, a type that matters in a way in which their other manipulations (casting, editing, implying meaning by setting recorded events to various types or moods of music, etc.) do not. What makes Mesnick’s decision “real” is that it was his own, given to viewers to understand as personal and heartfelt rather than calculated by producers--and never mind the overwhelmingly artificial context in which it was reached, or the innumerable other, venal manipulations by producers that coincide with it.

Fleiss’s statement, in contrast to Conrad’s, emphasizes reality TV’s dependence on that which is unscripted, sincere or spontaneous rather than admitting its necessary manipulations of

that raw content. According to this logic, when reality television loses its claim on spontaneity and unpredictability (claims reminiscent of Hagen and Meisner's insistence on the purity of the live moment in acting, from the previous chapter), incomplete and problematic though such a claim may be, it loses value—and connects itself to the morally embattled tradition of theatrical artificiality, where that which is scripted and rehearsed plays at seeming spontaneous and the well-feigned paints itself as sincere. Conrad's reply rejects this logic in favor of different, or at least more nuanced, view on the matter. Her answer takes for granted a viewing public that knows that such re-staging is "just the way they film reality shows," and is willing to make allowances for such interventions on behalf of the show's producers. Conrad's answer admits the paradox Rose and Wood describe in a way Fleiss's cannot, although her words above suggest that she expects viewers to dismiss it rather than contend with or negotiate it. At risk of oversimplifying a complex and overdetermined dynamic, Fleiss's response reads as modern—in that it suggests truth or realness as a knowable, absolute quantity that may or may not be present, which needs only the *lack* of scriptedness to emerge—while Conrad's reads as post-modern, indicating an acceptance of the real as messageable, tweakable, even rehearsable, betraying a lack of meaningful distinction between the event and its reproduction and allowing for the co-presence of realness and fakeness. Both statements suggest "realness" as valuable, but each figures it differently.

***Repertoires of enjoyment: savviness and spoiling.***

It is significant to me that audiences, or at least some audiences, accept and enjoy the genre-busting hybridity of the *The Hills*; the show's generic inconsistency is not necessarily the

immediate turn off one would imagine “bad” realism or faked verité to be. While Rose and Wood suggest a more interesting model for theorizing repertoires of viewer reception than an impossibly compliant, credulous public, they still posit authenticity as the sought-after or even required quality of reality television products. I would suggest, rather, that some viewers--and I think viewers of *The Hills*, or at least certain of them, are a prime example--do not necessarily require or seek authenticity, however contingent, and may not care to negotiate or co-produce it on the terms Rose and Woods describe.

If, however, evidence or suspicion of manipulation does not pose a serious threat to a negotiated and co-produced authenticity, why does such suspicion make entertainment news headlines (however tepid) and inspire flurries of chat room and bulletin board conversation? If it is taken for granted that “*The Hills* Is Sort of Scripted,” why are people looking so closely at Lauren Conrad’s fingernails in an attempt to catch the producers out in their machinations of the real?

The audience strategies deployed in consumption of the show are varied, and those viewers who appreciate and interact with the paradox Rose and Wood describe do so with different aims and sympathies. Rose and Wood themselves argue that the paradox negotiation they describe as an active viewer practice can occur even when subjects profess not to admire or even like the shows’ content; subjects may actively “love to hate” the reality shows they watch and negotiate (294). Rose and Woods point to SurvivorSucks.com, a website devoted to criticizing the various instantiations of the reality show *Survivor*. The website, though apparently critical of the show, functions as an area for viewers with more than superficial knowledge of it, who take pleasure both in consuming and ridiculing it. Rose and Wood present this process as a particular strategy

for extracting pleasure from the show while grappling with the sometimes disingenuous nature of reality television: “Approaching the text playfully or ironically,” they note, “facilitated the negotiation of the paradox of production and, therefore, eliminated potential threats to authentic experience” (294).

In her landmark study of the television show *Dallas*, Ien Ang notes that though a plot point within that show’s narrative hinges on two of the characters’ diagnosis with a grave illness that does not actually exist, “only a killjoy” would ruin the pleasurable experience of watching *Dallas* by pointing out such factual inconsistencies (66). However, for viewers of *The Hills*--a show with a stronger association with realness than the melodramatic soap *Dallas*--spotting gaffes or inconsistencies can be productive of pleasure rather than evacuate it by rupturing an illusion realness; using a critical eye to spot evidence of manipulation can be its own pastime. Online forums dedicated to *The Hills* do (or did, now that the series has ended) not only discuss it, they often dissect it, gleefully pointing out evidence of manipulated construction. For example, see VH1’s “*The Hills* Blog” recap of the episode in which a man’s hair miraculously shrinks and grows in length in the course of a single evening (“*The Hills*: Whitney Dates the Dull Trainer”) or posts like the following, to *The Hills*’ IMDB message boards:

Did anyone else notice how, in the scene where Audrina and Lauren were talking before getting ready to go out, Audrina's hair kept changing? One second it was perfectly styled over her left eye. The next shot, it was pulled back over the other shoulder. The hair literally changed every other line. (thatgirlyoulove)

I remember that Frankie had this new haircut for the hills [season] (*sic*) finale, where he had some lines on the side of his hair. In the bar shouting scene, he had the same haircut, which proved that the scenes were filmed after the hills finale. (natachaj)

Well, perhaps the whole show is scripted after all. Otherwise, wouldn't Lauren's parents have taken legal action on her behalf [regarding allegations that she had

made a sex tape with an ex-boyfriend, a pivotal plot in the show's narrative]? Any parent would have had Spencer [the accuser] and his "silent" accomplice [his girlfriend Heidi] in front of a judge faster than you can say "reality" tv.  
(hesterstreet)

When viewers are constantly—and often with relish—cataloguing the challenges to authenticity apparent in this reality television product, the “construction paradox” Rose and Wood describe is a different proposition. Here, viewers’ practices of reception, when confronted with such signs, seems less to reconcile them (with the notion of reality television as “true” or “real”) but to revel in them; they become not something to solve, but something to savor.

Henry Jenkins discusses a similar phenomenon in “Survivor Spoilers,” in which he investigates an online community devoted to undercutting the suspense of the reality show *Survivor* by gathering information about the series’ progress before the relevant episodes have aired. To the extent that it is a game or contest show, *Survivor* trades on suspense, ostensibly asking its audience to put aside the fact that by the time episodes have been produced and aired, the winner of the competition has already been decided. As its name implies, “spoiling” interrupts a traditional or assumed mode of consumption, in which it is supposed that viewers tacitly agree to ignore the fact (or any evidence) of the game’s already-determined outcome in a sort of suspension of disbelief. Rather than ignore that already-determined outcome, viewers who engage in spoiling try actively to thwart producers’ efforts to shroud the game in secrecy while it is being played, before the episodes are aired. In a sense, spoiling engages with *Survivor* in a way in which *The Hills*’ nailpolishgate phenomena does: rather than allowing themselves to be immersed in a constructed narrative so fully that evidence of construction (continuity errors, the evidence of editing) is ignored or effaced, viewers may also/instead enjoy



the program by paying specific attention to construction and intervention, by remaining vigilantly aware of the program's constructed and artificial nature rather than setting aside their knowledge of television as inherently constructed and simply consuming the proffered confection. Jenkins offers this strategy as evidence of the active role of consumers of the televisual in the age of media convergence: he notes that as a cooperative effort, spoiling depends on the networking that the internet provides, on blogs, message boards and Twitter feeds in and on which fans can communicate and puzzle out the show's secrets via a collective, collaborative intelligence. The same could be said of fans of *The Hills* who gather via network (on message boards, for instance) to discuss the show's apparent "reality" or lack thereof.

However, my interest here is not only in the productive, active role of the viewer demonstrated by such collaborative practices--something Jenkins focuses on at length in his discussion of *Survivor* spoiling--but in this particular behavior as indicative of a significant, subterranean pleasure, one not predicated on the actual achievement of authenticity, negotiated or otherwise, but rather produced through the location of authenticity's opposite. In the case of *The Hills*, "spoiling" isn't about trying to figure out the results of the series before the television show communicates them (although something like that may happen as viewers compare what they know of the stars' "real" lives from tabloid and gossip sites with what is shown on the series), and it is also more than the practice of building community or collective intelligence through interaction via web-based message boards and other media platforms, though viewers may indeed do so. More specifically, in the case of *The Hills* such viewer strategies betray a fascination with the inability to discern, absolutely, truth from fiction; the *as-if* of representation, simulation and theatricality from the ontological *is* of the real. Every nailpolishgate the close

observer triumphantly points out as evidence of fakery suggests not only its nominal opposite—situations in which the produced product *seems* not to have been manipulated, seems “natural” or spontaneous, even if the manipulation or production is just more artfully disguised—but the myriad moments in which no such conclusion has been reached or question prompted, in which the viewer has remained unsure of the degree or nature of a moment’s construction. Staring at the media object that is *The Hills* and trying to find its seams and cracks is a little like trying to dismantle the cyborg and sort its constituent parts into discrete categories: the natural, the real, the authentic; and the false, the synthetic, the constructed. No such dissection is possible, of course, when the boundary between the two categories is constantly exposed as porous and undependable.

The enterprise itself, however—the paying of close attention to apparent moments of fraud or inauthenticity—may suggest not only the temporary relief of the anxious subject who seeks to isolate what is inauthentic, but the titillating pleasure of a mixed reality, in which the viewing participant can never be sure of the ontology of the proceedings: real or fake? Sincere or playful? Spontaneous or rehearsed/staged? Neither one nor the other? The subjunctive operation of mimesis and theatricality, of acting, is simultaneously invoked: do the proceedings hinge on the “is” of actuality, or the “as-if” of mimetic theatricality? Are they doing it “for real,” or for show? Are these actions removed from the real through the mediatization that renders them representational, or are they theatrical prior to mediatization, the result of something more like acting than behaving? The particular pleasure of this kind of investigative probing is available both to viewers who profess to enjoy *The Hills* as an entertainment product

and those who love to hate it, who watch in order to condemn through disparagement of the show's many literally incredible moments.

The critic Joshua Gamson notes similar opposing possibilities for entertainment consumer's understandings of celebrity. Gamson writes of the uneasy coexistence of dual narratives regarding celebrity: the understanding of celebrity as "a natural phenomenon rewarding the deserving" exists simultaneously with a notion of celebrity as the product of hard work, perseverance and careful manufacture. The view of celebrity status as simultaneously the result of specific labor and inherent value indicates a tension in the popular imagination between the idea of stars as authentic and ineffable presences and the idea of them as skilled tradespeople, a tension not unlike the one produced by reality television's simultaneous mobilization of actuality and construction. Audiences manage this tension, according to Gamson, through multiple strategies, ranging from the "Traditional" viewer, who reports finding celebrity performances realistic and whose imagination emphasizes a star's "natural" ability or charisma--think the "natural" Burton--over her skillful image management or manipulation, to the "Postmodernist," who considers celebrity performances fictional, emphasizes the artificial and artful construction of celebrity persona, and generates pleasure by examining and dismantling the techniques of construction used to achieve it. Between these poles lie intermediate positions, viewers who consider celebrity performance "layered," or "semifictional" (146).

I reference Gamson because I find the multiple viewer strategies he outlines to be helpful in demonstrating how the search for authenticity may not be the only or even the chief motivating force for pleasure-seeking viewers: just as Gamson's "Postmodernist" subject prefers to focus on construction rather than negotiate an authenticity, viewers of *The Hills* who gain

pleasure from calling out the show's gaffes may be seeking and achieving a enjoyment not indebted to the pursuit of authenticity, no matter how negotiable or contingent such a quality might turn out to be. Gamson argues that those occupying the Postmodernist audience position embrace the "second story" of a media product's construction, manipulation, production, rather than the surface story of the product as true or real, as "its primary truth" (155). The critic Mark Andrejevic rightly questions the savvy conferred by this sort of spoiler-happy viewership, based as it is on the promise of a *real* reality uncovered by a distrust of the appearance of mediatized products--that is, the reality of ubiquitous manipulation. If this postmodern viewer's agnosticism leads her to believe that "behind every promise of truth or authenticity [there is] the *reality of illusion*," something like truth or reality still is still acting as a ground; the true reality the savvy viewers can rely on is reality television's unrelenting fakeness (133).

Andrejevic uses *Big Brother* as an exemplar of this phenomenon, particularly because the show's live internet feed divulged evidence of some of the manipulations involved in producing the television program. In one instance, internet viewers were party to producers providing scripted lines to the *Big Brother* houseguests on the occasion of a mock "roast" of three contestants nominated for banishment (132). A viewer who saw the scripted material introduced to the houseguests on the internet feed, and who also saw that the television show presented the scripted material as spontaneous, noted that "The houseguests are deliberately being falsely portrayed. . . . It is just a TV show and of course the point is to get high ratings, but it's somewhat insulting to TV-only viewers that CBS is practically writing the show and at the same time proclaiming it 'reality'" (qtd in Andrejevic 133). Andrejevic points out that this viewer ("among many others") pointed to the Internet feeds as giving him access "to the *real* reality of

the television show: the fact that it was artificial,” confirming the role of mediatization in misrepresenting the real *and* the role of internet-enabled participatory culture in working, in a liberatory manner, against the clear “manipulative tendencies of the entertainment industry” (133, emphasis in original; 122). He further suggests that savvy viewers’ somewhat self-congratulatory scoffing obscures a more interesting question. “Why,” he directs us to ask, “is reality TV pretending that it’s real, so that we may cannily believe it’s phony, when it accurately portrays the reality of . . . contemporary society?”

This “reality,” for Andrejevic, is one in which what he calls “the work of being watched” is increasingly big business (2). He links reality TV to various types of self-exposure and surveillance enabled by the internet and participatory digital culture more generally, including blogging, video diaries, lifecasting, and “surveillance-based interactive commerce” (in which your recent Amazon purchases and Google searches define which products and advertisements the sites offer you). She who allows her every move, or some important subset, to be watched by millions on television or online, Andrejevic argues, “exhibits more than an incidental similarity (albeit on a different scale) to the computer user who allows Yahoo to monitor her web browsing habits in exchange for access to a free email account” (13). What’s more, this surveillance is often framed as a service, usually a gratuitous one: Amazon and Google present their offering of targeted ads and products as a solicitous, complimentary feature that allows them to better serve users’ individual needs. Similarly, free-of-charge blogging platforms and YouTube channels exist, ostensibly, to facilitate users’ self-expression. “At a time when being watched is an increasingly productive activity,” Andrejevic writes, “we are presented with the spectacle of how fun surveillance can be, how it can help us learn about ourselves and provide access to the reality

ostensibly occluded by the . . . homogenization, abstraction, and media manipulation associated with the culture industry” (8). Andrejevic sees the participating public as coached into its own self-disclosure under the celebratory rhetorics of self-expression and democratic participation; what’s covered over, he suggests, is the productive labor involved in being surveilled, work from which certain institutions profit but which offers the subjects of surveillance little more than a targeted incentive to buy more and different products, masked as an opportunity for self-expression and customized “service.” Increasingly, consumers generate value by subjecting themselves to a comprehensive digital gaze. The information gleaned is valuable; the work of being watched is real labor--real labor that hides in the complicated, nested set of performances Andrejevic references when he suggests that reality TV presents the real implications of participatory culture even as it masquerades as a fraud.

Andrejevic argues that the cynical, knowing viewer position he describes--“the logic of savviness”--is a conservative stance, one that “naturalizes the status quo in the very attempt not to be duped by it.” Such viewers’ supposedly clear-eyed assessment of the manipulations necessary for the commercial processes that produce television (or, one would imagine, of the data gathering products of companies like Google or Amazon, also in the service of profit) effectively renders its commercial model as natural and unavoidable, “a brute fact of nature: as immoral as an earthquake” (135). The cynical pose, in casting ubiquitous manipulation as an inevitable fact of mediatized life, has the effect of disguising the contingent and very real work of being watched as a kind of naturally occurring duty, the result of an ineluctable drive rather than the strategic goal of specific systems. (This is legible in the viewer whose comments about the Big Brother roast he cites: “of course the point is to get high ratings,” the viewer writes,

implying not only that the desire is natural but that the way to comply with it, the way to attract viewer attention, is a forgone conclusion: it is mistakenly taken as an “ahistorical given,” as Andrejevic writes [135].) Andrejevic also notes that this viewer cynicism derogates illusion as a worthless, if unavoidable, artifact of mediatization, foreclosing the possibility for illusion as a catalyst for change. The deceptive illusion of a televisual fantasy, in this figuring, might be admired by the dunces among us but serves the larger, ignoble purpose of disguising the reality of constant illusion-making itself: the most dangerous fiction is the suggestion that artificiality is not ubiquitous. That is, illusion not only serves up a fake, but does the disservice, generally, of dissuading those not sufficiently savvy to know better from looking behind the curtain. Invoking an attempt by Adorno “to take seriously the function of illusion,”<sup>28</sup> Andrejevic writes that regarding illusion as significant, rather than trivial, would mean “salvaging the moment internal to [illusion] that promises things could be otherwise” (136). The savvy viewer, then, may not only be a greater dupe than the imaginary docile viewer against whom she implicitly opposes herself, but is actively perpetuating the processes that allow reality television to continue masquerading as a fraud: believing herself to be a knowing insider, she continues to watch without recognizing her role in the economy of surveillance or the tacit realness of the situation

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<sup>28</sup> He locates this in Adorno’s “Subject and Object,” writing that “Adorno argues that the illusion of a reified ‘second nature’ has real social consequences that cannot be dispelled merely by pointing out the ‘illusory’ nature of their cause.” By way of example, he cites “the reality of the illusion of freedom” and its role in “legitimizing current forms of exploitation as the result of freely entered-into relations of exchange: workers shouldn’t complain about working conditions because they agreed to them when they accepted the job, and they are ‘free’ to leave” (136). The “savvy move” when faced with this fallacy, he points out, would be to debunk it, to demonstrate how the promise of freedom is leveraged in exploitation. However, “Such a move would be just as naturalizing and regressive as clinging to the illusion.” He cites Simon Jarvis’s words on “Subject and Object” to this effect: “In these circumstances the attempt to dispel all illusion may merely serve the idea that the real is the absolute” (qtd in Andrejevic 136).

she supposedly “sees through,” in the process discrediting illusion as a cheap counterfeit rather than an site of potential.

If Rose and Wood seem rather proud of the agency of their co-productive viewers, and Andrejevic is (rightly) suspicious of the savviness of viewers who love to hate reality television, I find myself more intrigued by a viewer who might use the technique of spoiling--one repertoire of enjoyment among many possible, and possibly coincident, others--to *explore* reality television and its mixed commitments. While spoiling viewers seem, on the surface, to be self-consciously savvy viewers bent on derogating illusion, in the form of manipulated artificiality, as lesser-than-real, I read this viewer practice not as reifying the neatness and stability of categories like “fake” and “real,” but as implicitly drawing them into question. What I find interesting about *The Hills* is not merely that viewers see its outrageous fakeness and continue to watch and enjoy the show anyway, but the glee with which evidence of contrivance is pointed out by viewers who pounce on the show’s less believable moments. These gotcha moments in which *The Hills*’ extraordinary artifice becomes obvious are read, on one hand, as states of exception, either within the show or within the genre more generally: a given moment, like the nail polish incident, is marked as eye-roll worthy; a given show, like *The Hills*, stands out as particularly false. On the other, however, the presence of these exceptional moments or shows casts doubt on the “reality” premise of the genre generally, suggesting that the *entire* enterprise is suspect, gaffes and unobjectionable moments alike. Gaffes and gotchas may reveal the heavy construction and manipulation viewers knowingly suspect, but if they do so, they almost certainly throw into question the moments in the shows that “pass” (as real, or as real enough) without notice, as well.



If spoiling viewers enjoy poking holes in fragile illusions they claim never to have been seduced by in the first place, the practice may be something more than *schadenfreude*, something other, even, than the savviness critiqued by Andrejevic. I suggest that spoiling viewers are exploring something interesting, simultaneously exciting and treacherous, about the lack of distinction between the staged and the spontaneous, the authentic and the artificial. After all, each *nailpolishgate* the close observer triumphantly points out as evidence of fakery suggests not only its nominal opposite, but also evokes the myriad moments which pass unremarked and unmarked as authentic or not, which sit in an explorable limbo between two supposedly mutually exclusive polarities. This situation might be, for such viewers, a potent if surreptitious indicator of the frank impossibility of knowing, in the end, what has been staged, or to what extent it has been staged, or even of claiming with certainty that there is a qualitative and certain difference, or that any one behavior or piece of action can fit exclusively in one of those two categories. The label that can be definitively affixed to a continuity error or improbable happening—“Fake!”—may momentarily suggest a neat divide between the false-and-constructed and the authentically genuine, but at the same time it calls that divide into question by implying the unknowable provenance, in the end, of *all* moments.

And the pleasure for which I argue is a different beast than the rather hollow one I imagine is enjoyed by Andrejevic’s savvy viewer: if the savvy viewer is self-congratulatory, regards herself as possessed of insider knowledge that potentially elevates her above the duped masses, the one I describe is implicitly excited by the potential the same artifacts hold for proving that viewers specifically cannot be certain of, are not savvy to the extent to which moments are staged, spontaneous, sincere, or otherwise. I propose that the viewer who reads to

Andrejevic as savvy might also, simultaneously, be enjoying this subtler, even unconscious pleasure--that what might undergird her protestations that she sees through the illusion is the exciting doubt that she can ever be sure the whole story, or even that illusion and reality are the distinct and opposed categories received knowledge suggests them to be. Something like this pleasure is also on offer to audiences of the Wooster Group *Hamlet* I discussed in the last chapter; the difficulty of discerning between a putatively “heartfelt” performance and a surface-level imitation of the same spurs some of the same exciting confusion. The moments in which Shepherd appears to wield Burton’s passion provoke a similar uncertainty, in which what I described as “a near-mechanical exercise in copy-making” is presented as indistinguishable, at least dependably, from passionate artistry. In *Hamlet*, when the an exacting imitation of passion can be legible as the thing itself, ontologies are similarly up for grabs.

Though I have suggested that the *The Hills*’ occasional exposure of its heavily constructed nature was not off-putting to fans per se, fans did demonstrate an awareness of (and sometimes a dissatisfaction with) particularly obvious manipulations or “stagedness”:

I think this show is getting faker by the episode. It seems like at the beginning of the series MTV was just staging certain things and re-enacting stuff that wasn't originally caught on camera, but I swear now they are reading cue cards or straight off a script. It's especially obvious whenever Whitney or Audrina open their mouth. Or maybe I'm just in a pissy mood because it never seemed this bad before. (Christina07)

Audrina acting as the publicist for important events, with no experience or degree, Heidi opening hotels in Vegas with the CEO of the company, with no experience or college marketing degree...? Seriously... people can still believe this is 'real'? I would have an easier time believing that Iron Man [a comic book superhero] was real . . . They need to ground this a little bit more, it's just such a huge leap to believe this stuff anymore. (ronineditor)

Even viewers who seem to decry the moments in which *The Hills* tips its hand may in fact be

complaining not so much that the show is “fake,” but that the producers are making the game too easy, eliminating the challenge that spoiling presents—and therefore limiting or eviscerating the pleasurable excitement of navigating liminal space. The pleasures occasioned by the show’s unusual mix of the reality and soap-drama genres is imperiled if the alchemy is disturbed; make its contents dismissible, so overwhelmingly staged for effect that it might as well be fiction, and the tension described earlier is gone. Spoiling loses the subversive excitement of treading the ground between truth and fiction if it is perceived that construction too far outstrips spontaneity.

When fan “FashionVictim19” writes

[M]aybe Speidi's [Spencer and Heidi's] storyline would mean more if:

- 1) RS [*Rolling Stone*] hadn't told us that Bolthouse isn't even her real job, so there was no actual job offer, it was all fake.
- 2) They hadn't broken up on the last finale all to have a happy ending on this season...like the tabloids said they've been planning all along.
- 3) It had any connection to the rest of the show whatsoever.
- 4) Um, IF IT WASN'T FAKE?

s/he alludes to the absence of the desired effect: the alchemical balance that allows a possibly fantastic plot line to retain something of its compellingly hybrid nature. Rose and Wood’s analysis suggests that what is necessary for “good” reality television is a balance between construction, on the one hand, and on the other, content that is read as “real.” I would add, though, that the purpose of this careful balance is not only in order to preserve the ability to negotiate authenticity in the face of construction, as under Rose and Wood’s model. Such a balance, the careful construction that combines elements of the actual with shrewd manipulation, is also necessary for the uncertainty that predicates the excitement of the liminal space I describe, the tension of which may be far more exciting than the process of awarding authenticity and “solving” the dilemma. Comments like this one were common in the bulletin boards I monitored

during the last seasons of the show's run:

I really liked these two episodes. They seemed alot (*sic*) more "real" than the normal episodes are. (Jamie1)

It is possible to see in this viewer response, and the ones cited above, a preference for, or higher valuation of, the real or the seeming authentic over the appreciably false or staged; it is also possible to appreciate in them the kind self-congratulatory savviness that Andrejevic describes.

I suggest, however, that viewers may not be prioritizing realness or authenticity, or even congratulating themselves on their own sophistication so much as enjoying an experimental exploration of realness, of authenticity, as an unknowable quantity. After all, a meaningful *appearance* of realness or authenticity makes possible the exciting uncertainty described above.

While these viewer responses affect a relatively cynical attitude toward the series in general, suggesting at first glance that viewers ascribe *no* authenticity to the events of the show, the nods of approval grudgingly awarded to scenes or episodes that seemed “*more ‘real’*” (emphasis added) seem to me to betray a desire not for truth itself, but for a more exciting mixed reality, one which specifically allows for some confusion regarding what, exactly, qualifies as real or authentic. It is clear that fans sometimes seek the appearance of realness or authenticity and complain when the show fails to deliver it, but I would suggest that, at least for certain fans, this is not so much so that they may suspend their disbelief, but in order to *incur* some of it. When no moments—or very few—read as acceptably “real,” *The Hills* fails to provide the tension its soap-reality hybridity is supposed to bring to the table, and deprives fans—at least the spoiler-mongers—of the opportunity to experience plausible doubt regarding the ontologies of actuality and theater, and even about the mutually exclusive nature of, in the language of the fan message boards, “the real” and “the fake.”

*Immediacy and intimate access.*

Television, like other mediatizing forces which render the actual into a representation of itself, remove to a distance the very reality they grant access to. If, as Philip Auslander suggested in a citation from this dissertation's introduction, "the common assumption is that the live event is 'real' and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real," television itself would seem inevitably to attenuate the ontology of its representation of events as real (3). However, Auslander also follows Jane Feuer in suggesting that television, though it is no longer the live medium it began as, remains fundamentally connected to liveness: he argues that early television's "essence was seen in its ability to transmit events as they occur, not in a filmic capacity to record events for later viewing" (12). As Feuer famously argued, if liveness is no longer the ontology of television, it remains its ideology; the vocabularies and practices surrounding the production and consumption of television continue to reference its beginnings in live broadcast (something which becomes particularly evident in the exceptional moments in which television "goes live" for emergency broadcasts or the dissemination of important and timely news). Auslander sees in television, as in film, a remediation of theater, but argues that while film "could only remediate the theater at . . . structural levels,<sup>29</sup>" television could remediate theater "at the ontological level through its claim to immediacy": the Electronovision process described in the last chapter, which relied on smaller television cameras

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<sup>29</sup> Auslander references Nicholas Vardac, among others, as support for his assertion that "Early film modeled itself directly on theatrical practice;" he notes that Vardac's 1949 Stage to Screen demonstrates how the "narrative structures and visual devices of cinema" were developed in stage practice (for Vardac, particularly in nineteenth century melodrama) before being leveraged for the camera (11).

that could be placed inside a theater, serves as one example of television's role as a more nimble, more agile mediatizing force than film. Auslander cites a great deal of period criticism from the early days of television which highlights its immediacy and intimacy, including "analyst" Robert Wade's assertion that television was "a new and synthetic medium . . . radio with sight, movies with the zest of immediacy, theatre (intimate or spectacular) with all seats about six rows back and at the centre, tabloid opera and circus without peanut vendors" (qtd in Auslander, 15).

Television, then, carries with it some of the aura of the live, and the live's concomitant association with the real, even as it serves as an unquestionably mediatizing force that attenuates that reality. Misha Kavka and Amy West, in their work on the conceptualizing of time in reality television, suggest that temporality is re-ordered by/in the construction of reality television products, "distilling it into socially recognizable units which are reiterable, and hence return as ever new, ever present" (139). Such re-ordering deflects attention away from the "canned" and processed, non-live nature of reality television, synthetically producing the effect of immediacy which Feuer, Philip Auslander and others have noted was the distinguishing factor of early, live television and the inheritance of televisual products today (15). Reality television's dependence on a certain appearance of liveness is also noted by John Ellis, who observes that contemporary reality television employs the verbal and visual rhetorics of liveness even though its method of production nearly always necessitates a significant time gap between actual events and their representation within the shows (33).

And not only immediacy, Auslander reminds, but *intimacy* was the hallmark of early television; reality TV, which frequently promises intimate access to the beautiful and the

privileged, is in this sense indebted to a genealogy that stretches back to the inception of broadcast television and is inseparable from it. In the early years of television, that intimacy was constructed in production, particularly in shooting, casting and performance techniques, and in reception, as television was viewed on smaller screens in intimate, private spaces (as opposed to the publicness of movie houses). Performance styles particularly suited to television (as opposed to stage or film) were foundational to securing for the medium a different role and power than that held by the cinema. In the 1940s and 50s, Rhona Berenstein writes, “liveness and immediacy served as markers of the medium’s assumed calling and as signposts of proper performance skills” (26). It is something of a truism that acting for the camera, be it for film or television (or now, for video games or web content) requires sets of skills, even an entire aesthetic distinct from what is required for the stage. Berenstein further suggests that early discourse regarding acting for television as a new medium perceived it from the start as quite different from film acting, and focused overwhelmingly on the necessity of “offering viewers performances that were assumed or promoted to be true to life” (26). Successful television actors were to be both natural (unadulterated in the same sense as live television was) and accessible, profoundly available via a medium constantly heralded for its intimacy and immediacy.

The technical means of constructing television’s visual picture, of course, also contributed to the overarching mandate of produced intimacy. The close-up shot became a staple of television early on; Berenstein writes that it “can be understood as both a technical necessity (camera work was developed, in part, to accommodate the screen’s small size) and an ideological effect (camerawork was coincident with selling products to viewers via intimate and realistic

means)” (39-40). For actors, the close-up was a chance to reveal themselves, to grant (seemingly) intimate access: Berenstein quotes period acting coach Edwin Duerr’s admonition that “The actor’s face must be so sensitive that it can reflect a character’s every thought and emotion until the viewers can literally *see* the personality” (40). Duerr’s insistence on the bodily visibility of “personality” points to a truism often held to apply to TV and film performance by actors, especially in close up: that in front of the camera, acting is behaving; that it is better for the actor to *be* than to *do*, rendering the personality of the actor more important, both more visible and more foundational, than it is in stage work. This demand for intimate and true-to-life performance to suit the new medium led also to an increased awareness of the actor’s person or personality as central to television acting. Not unlike the imaginary of the “natural Burton”, early television stars were praised for attributes they were assumed to share with their characters, not to assume in order to play them.

Reality television, then, and specifically the performances within it, stand as obvious inheritors of TV’s general demand for intimate access and a kind of personal authenticity. One way in which reality television complies with, and perhaps even exemplifies, television’s historical mandate to produce intimacy is by granting access to performers’ bedrooms, bathrooms, domestic disputes and intimate conversations. In some cases, the public exposure of intimate romantic or sexual acts is a chief appeal, as in the fantasy suite episodes of *The Bachelor* this chapter will later discuss, or in *Temptation Island*, in which monogamous straight couples undergo repeated “tests” of their promised monogamy, which are then offered to the partners (and the wider televisual audience) for viewing. Intimate access is also granted live-in scenario programs like *Big Brother*, where constant surveillance assures viewers of access to



what only intimates would normally see. Even in relatively tame workplace reality series that do not promise the intimacies of sex, romantic love or constant home surveillance, viewers are given to understand that what the show brings them is a kind of backstage access, despite the staged artificiality of reality TV's premise: even in a workplace as seemingly devoid of mystery as a tanning parlor, E!'s *Sunset Tan* promises (on the show's webpage) "a deep, dark peek inside L.A.'s most chichi tanning salon."

Reality television's dependence on intimate access to bolster its claim to realness, however, can also hinge on the promise of participants' "being real" in front of the cameras: access to performers' "real" selves, however citational their behavior, rather than the overtly rehearsed, scripted, and artificial portrayals presented by actors. Even when the "real" selves exposed on reality TV are theatrical or manipulative, these strategies may also be received as just that: an exposure of a participant's true nature as showy or untrustworthy. In this sense, reality TV depends on an intimate access to participants' self that in turn depends on a lack of separation between performer and role--something that, as previously discussed, characterized the development of television acting as a specific style, and which can be seen to prefigure reality television's dubious promise of no acting at all, only real people, being themselves. Reality television viewers are given to understand that performer and performed persona coincide entirely—or nearly so; performance being the shady enterprise that it is, the authenticity of the behavior of "real" people on reality television is continually suspect, requiring near constant confirmation. That confirmation often involves, or even requires, self-disclosure. For example, contestants on *Top Chef* and *Project Runway*, where professional skill and talent rather than romantic suitability are up for judgment, are routinely compelled by the shows' judges to show

who they *really* are through their work, and praised when their “real” selves have been made apparent (or when the contestants have gone through the motions of performing self-exposure or self-revelation<sup>30</sup>). In the same vein, the famous tagline of *The Real World*, an iconic instantiation of reality programming often credited as the first show recognizable, retrospectively, as contemporary reality television, invites viewers to see what happens when the participants “stop being polite and start getting real.” Marc Andrejevic notes that contestants in the *Big Brother* house during the series’ first season were consistently praised by viewers for being “real” and unfavorably judged when they appeared “fake” (125). When reality TV stars successfully perform authenticity, they not only win approbation from fans and judges, but also help to strengthen reality TV’s attenuated, embattled claim to realness.

If reality TV generally can be seen as the inheritor of the televisual’s alignment with intimacy and authenticity, the sub-genre of what Misha Kavka terms “true-love” television--programs that propose to aid participants in finding romantic love, often using a competitive structure that eliminates a central subject’s potential mates until a single, best match emerges, as in ABC’s *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*--stands as a particularly rich site in which to investigate this inheritance and its implications. This “real-love” television promises intimate

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<sup>30</sup> I always think of Hung Huynh, the winner of the third season of *Top Chef*, who was dominating the competition handily but still found himself receiving criticism for a certain emotional remove in his cooking (a critique which, far from incidentally, resonated uncomfortably with certain Orientalist stereotypes). After judges accused Huynh of not cooking with enough “heart,” a *New York Times* blogger covering the show wrote “Hung suddenly morphed — at least semantically — into one big, red beating heart that had been marinated for 24 hours in essence of soul . . . Anytime a judge asked him a question, a Hung response went something like this: ‘I was just cooking with my heart! I have so much love in my cooking! My cooking is about love and soul and, oh, did I mention heart? Did I mention the soulful cooking of my mother and my grandmother and my aunt and my uncle and our next-door neighbor and how it took up a permanent place in my own heart, which is so full of the love of cooking?’” (NYTimes.com)

access not only to romance and physical intimacy, but to the storied and loaded bundle of emotional content labeled as (romantic, normative, heterosexual) *love*. Realness or authenticity, concomitantly depended on and produced by reality TV as a genre, is especially crucial to the sub-genre of true-love shows--particularly on the behalves of the participants' performances of self, given that such shows are employing notions of romantic love constructed to place considerable emphasis on an authentic presentation of self.<sup>31</sup>

I remain unsure how to contend properly with the messiness of this term--"true-love"--for my purposes here; as a notion or imaginary, it has considerable popular weight but masquerades as a unified quantity that cannot be adequately described or contained, but with which a generalized television audience is presumed to have implicit, universal facility. It goes without saying that romantic love is not the universal, compulsory ambition it is presented to be in *The Bachelor*: "love" as the show defines it appears to an exclusively heterosexual enterprise, engaged in by the young and beautiful, cloyingly normative and indebted to notions of romantic love that are presented as transhistorical and even transcultural, even as they draw from historically and culturally particular constructions. If I paint with sloppy strokes, here, I hope it reflects the general sloppiness of this "true love," which seems to resist satisfactory definition even as it thrives as a popular imaginary.

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<sup>31</sup> Positioning contemporary reality shows like *The Bachelor* within a genealogy that includes shows like the 1960s-era *The Dating Game* (in the UK, *Blind Date*; in Australia, *Perfect Match*) seems to make clear television's particular suitedness for the project of competitive love-matching; I know of no other medium in which a cognate of this genre exists--there is no, for example, true-love cinema with the same project, or radio program, to my knowledge--while the popularity of the love-seeking television has followed the general popularity of reality TV. However, since 2011 an online version of *The Dating Game* was released by 3G Studios for social networks like Facebook and Twitter, echoing a correspondence between digital participatory culture and reality TV suggested by critics like Henry Jenkins and Mark Andrejevic.

In absence of a thorough historicization, I find it helpful to point briefly to Edgar Landgraf's characterization of contemporary ideas of romantic love as overwhelmingly reliant on authenticity, a turn he traces to Enlightenment and Romantic roots:

Lovers today are expected to adhere to an ideal of communication that emphasizes genuineness, truthfulness, and originality. . . . The association of love with authenticity and the validation of one's self-portrayal, which has led us away from the idealization of such attributes of romance as passion, sensibility, and chivalry, evolved in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (29-30)

The sort of love Landgraf describes as contemporary—dependent on “genuineness” and honest self-portrayal—seems unfriendly to the prospect of performance generally, and certainly likely to resist the sort of staging that shows like *The Bachelor* self-consciously enact. This love is as difficult (impossible) to guarantee or prove as is an honest or authentic performance of self: never sure, certainly never beyond doubt. Knowing whether or not love is present, or whether feelings of love are sincere or feigned, deep or superficial, is a dilemma with only subjective and insecure answers—which makes it, as Kavka notes, consistently subject to the same questions that popularly attend reality TV, primarily whether or not it's actually “real”:

If television is a medium that invites questions about how real its version of reality is, then love is oddly similar. Open to doubts about whether it is real, always begging to be proved or performed, love even has the putative power to skew one's view of reality (as paradoxical proof that you're ‘really in it’).

Like the behavior of reality television participants, its authenticity cannot be satisfactorily secured and so requires constant confirmation.

Misha Kavka resorts to *The Matrix*'s Oracle for an articulation of the tell-tale signs of “real” romantic love: “No one can tell you you're in love. You just know it, through and

through, balls to bones” (qtd in Kavka 104).<sup>32</sup> A lot of *telling*, however, happens on the set of *The Bachelor*: contestants are nearly constantly *telling* a man that they are, or might be, or could be, in love with him. And if telling is inadequate in a conventional context, on the patently artificial set of a reality game show it must be even more suspicious. Ironically, telling is both opposed to and awfully close to *acting*, depending on whether the word denotes action itself or the job of theatrical pretending, and in this lies the insufficiency of emotional protestations on reality TV: a mere say-so is inadequate to warrant the internal state that love (or passion, or sincerity) is thought to be. As Scott Shepherd’s Burton’s Hamlet makes clear, the appearance of passion may not be enough to certify an internal state--it may be just that, an appearance, a piece of mimicry (Shepherd) or mimesis (Burton).

In “Talking Alone: Reality TV, emotions and authenticity,” Minna Aslama and Mervi Pantti examine the action of monologue, including the confessional monologues in which much of this “telling” happens, in reality television contexts; in particular, they consider it alongside other strategies for communicating and displaying emotion in televised confessional discourses. Aslama and Pantti cite a long genealogy of televisual “genres and programmes that offer opportunities for the public display of once-private feeling,” in which confessional monologues are offered as sites of genuine emotional content (167). The monologues, reminiscent of theatrical monologues and soliloquies charged with the function of intimate revelation, “create the arena for simultaneously expressing the emotional and making claims of the authenticity of

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<sup>32</sup> Kavka also takes responsible issue with The Oracle’s definition, of course: “love is never just a matter of balls-and-bones interiority; it requires social sanction, ideally leading to a ceremony of public proclamation . . . . It is thus no surprise that real-love TV shows aspire to an engagement, or at least a public confirmation of feeling. The basic unease that makes us ask whether love is real, like the unease about the reality of reality TV, finds its solace precisely in the ritual of public confirmation” (104).

those emotions,” and in so doing, making a claim for the authenticity of the show’s events more generally (168). Aslama and Pantti point in particular to the tearful post-dismissal exit monologue of Kelly Jo, the runner-up bachelorette from *The Bachelor*’s fourth season:

My heart is broken. I go from a limo towards the man I’m in love with thinking I’m going to spend the rest of my life with him. Next minute I was walking away with nothing. (qtd in Aslama and Pantti, 169)

In the monologue, Kelly Jo emphasizes the significance and seriousness of her love for bachelor Bob Guiney so definitively (“I’m in love with,” “spend the rest of my life with him”) precisely because her claim to love is suspect. Aslama and Pantti are concerned with how monologue as a form (like the confessional monologues taped during the dismissed contestants’ limo rides away from the set) works through, or despite, this contradiction. They write that

Traditionally, in drama as well as prose, single-person speech situations have served to reveal the inner life, secret thoughts and feelings of the characters. Interestingly, reality shows have reintroduced this out-of-date staged talk situation into the context of television. Indeed, it can be argued that it is precisely the monologue that is at the core of reality television, as it provides for those moments when emotions run free and a person’s true self appears. We argue that the specific moments of talking alone are used on the whole as a truth-sign of direct access to the ‘real.’ (175)

While remaining healthily suspicious of anything like a “true self” that is revealed by solo talk, especially in a reality television situation, it is possible to see in the confessions that concern Aslama and Pantti certain gestures or “truth-signs” meant to strengthen the performance’s claim to realness. In particular, they note the frequency of close-up shots during moments of intense emotionality (invoking the visual-technical vocabulary of intimacy referenced by Berenstein), especially the ubiquity of tearful reaction shots, noting that performances of emotion are “confirmed by tears or other bodily signs of true feeling” (170). In an echo of *The Oracle*’s

“balls to bones,” they suggest bodies and their actions as evidentiary sites that may succeed as proof or guarantee when words fail.

Misha Kavka works through the dilemma of true-love television slightly differently, by calling attention to the performative nature of intimacy as it is enacted by participating bodies. She suggests that rather than engage in the business of proving love by proclaiming it to a wide, public audience, “the medium provides a forum where performing love can *generate* the very emotion it seems to reveal” (106, emphasis in original). In Kavka’s view, the emotions produced in the context of the show are not so much suspect due to the ridiculous artificiality of the show’s premise, but rather called into being by that same artifice: women<sup>33</sup> are called on to take as an overriding objective the securing of a man’s love; a man judges them in turn for their suitability as mates. Through her lens the artifice emerges not as a hindrance to authentic or sincere emotion—a handicap which must be overcome—but as the situation which precipitates it.

The talk on true-love TV, then, might look more like bodies doing things with words than selves succeeding or failing to speak a “felt” truth authentically. Aslama and Pantti point obliquely to bodies as holding power when words fail, or fail alone, to authenticate a “true self” in a dubiously authentic situation (the teary eyes help to prove what spoken words leave vulnerable), but for Kavka, bodies are not charged with certifying an internal state: a “performance of love is enacted out of the affective space between bodies, made productive by the televisual trappings of intimacy, rather than the interior of bodies or selves.” These televisual trappings that produce intimacy include a lexicon of reality television conventions: switching between group “surveillance” and individual confession, the melodramatic ritual of dismissing

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<sup>33</sup> It bears repeating that these are not just, or plainly, “women” and “men” but young and beautiful exemplars, for the most part, of social and gender norms.

contestants, and “the close-ups of faces contorted by emotion or dissolving into tears”--the same bodily (or at least body-oriented; close-up shots of body parts, heavily edited, may not quite feel “bodily”) evidence that Aslama and Pantti mark as indicative of true feeling, here suggested as productive of emotional intimacy rather than its guarantee (109).

What happens with, to, or on bodies is often read as more real, less fake-able than “mere” speech--especially as concerns acting or other performance; Duse’s blush was compelling to George Bernard Shaw because he “could detect no trick” in the apparently autonomic nature of the physical reaction (141). Figuring bodies as unable to lie or dissemble is to hold them pure in a way that is undoubtedly problematic; if bodies exist as documents of social practice, if they are constructed rather than given, if they are, quite literally, *acting* all the time, their status as arbiters of authenticity seems misplaced. Aslama and Pantti’s recourse to tears and crying as evidence of sincerity is troubling insofar as it suggests bodily function as this kind of transparent, unfeignable guarantee of language, but perhaps helpful to the extent that they read such behavior a sign that confers a kind of negotiated, contingent authenticity. In this sense, I confess that I *am* interested in the potential for bodily action to guarantee performance, not so much because it actually secures for performance some authenticity that it would otherwise lack, but because it is so commonly read as doing so.

To me, the most interesting episodes of the *Bachelor* franchise are the semi-finals of each season, when the contestants embark on “fantasy suite” dates in which the titular bachelor goes on overnight “dates” with the three remaining contestants. After each day-long excursion, followed by an intimate dinner, he has the option to invite the contestant to spend a night with him in a “fantasy suite” rather than in separate rooms (generally speaking, the fantasy suite offer



is usually extended, and usually accepted). I will close this section with a reading of episode seven of the thirteenth season of *The Bachelor*--that season's "fantasy suite" episode.

It opens with a rather smarmy voice over—"One man! Three beautiful women!"—and wastes no time in displaying teaser shots of bachelor Jason Mesnick kissing the semi-final contestants in and out of hot tubs. By season thirteen, fans of *The Bachelor* know what the fantasy suite episode will entail: most salaciously, the promise of physical intimacy between Mesnick and the semi-finalists. Each of the semi-finalist bachelorettes is, in turn, taken on "the date of a lifetime" by Mesnick; we see all of contestant Jillian Harris's date with Mesnick before moving on to his date with Molly Malaney, and then his date with Melissa Rycroft. The "dates" have a symmetry that emphasizes the artificiality of the show's construct: each involves some kind of outdoor activity, followed by a romantic dinner and the proffered invitation for an overnight stay.

Harris goes first, and over dinner, she shares sentiments that rival the jilted Kelly Jo's in extravagant emotional promise: "I am crazy about you. I am. And I have never in my entire life felt like somebody is more meant for me than you are." Mesnick kisses her with apparent ardor, and via voice over we hear him declare:

I'm so excited. And I'm so happy. That's exactly what I needed to happen; I needed to feel that between us . . . and beautiful and as sexy as she was, I could not have waited longer for that moment.

The implication seems to be that Harris's "task" in this episode is to prove that a sexual spark can ignite between the two of them. In the episodes preceding this one, Harris has been drawn as

something of a best buddy, potentially lacking the power to physically attract Mesnick.<sup>34</sup> She works dutifully against this portrayal in the episode, propositioning Mesnick herself before he can invite her to the fantasy suite, asking him if he can “handle” an entire night with her.

He decides he can, and soon the two of them, in bathing suits, are getting into a hot tub. They engage in a make-out session that resembles particularly boring soft-core porn. As they do, the music underscoring the “date” changes distinctly, from a generically pastoral acoustic guitar to a vaguely Spanish melody with prominent castanets, clearly coded as passionate. In the montage that follows, the camera lingers frankly on certain areas of their bodies (their arms moving underwater, Harris’s legs wrapped around Mesnick, her hands on his ass) in a way that seems less poetic than documentary (let it be known: third base was reached, etc.). It seems clear that Harris is taking on a challenge that often comes up in true-love shows like *The Bachelor*: she’s putting her body where her speech is, guaranteeing her words (and her claimed internal state, one of desire) with bodily action. More than either of the other semi-finalists, Harris has been specifically charged to prove herself as sexually compatible with Mesnick, but for each remaining “bachelorette,” the “opportunity” to spend the night with the prize (and the on-camera kissing and caressing that precede the overnight) appears to do some of the same work as the close-up of the teary face: to guarantee professed feeling, to emphatically suggest that the contestants are not just telling, but acting. Completing this logic, of course, is a

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<sup>34</sup> In fact, the qualities of each of the semi-finalists have largely been reduced to this sort of single flaw: Malaney supposedly can’t make herself vulnerable, Rycroft has family issues (her parents refused to take part in the show’s meet-the-parents episode, leaving her commitment to family relationships unexamined). The “flaws” seem arbitrary and suspiciously handy—already part of a well-known love relationship lexicon—and each is parceled out as if to give the contestant something to work against in this penultimate episode, in which, predictably: Harris gets sexy, Malaney goes through the motions of letting her guard down, and Rycroft delivers a speech about the importance of her family.

somewhat puritanical taboo against casual physical intimacy; what suggests the fantasy dates' content as "proof" (however flawed) of feeling is the notion that intimacy *without* such "real" feeling would be anathema--especially such explicitly public, televised intimacy, which could be easily read as strategically salacious performance for a voyeur nation rather than the "natural" outflowing of romantic feeling that the show frames it as. The vigorous claims of love the contestant-bachelorettes make are backed up by their presence on the fantasy dates, by their willingness to undergo and broadcast their physical intimacy with Mesnick, intimacy which is in turn sanctioned by their professed depth of feeling. Or rather, are *not* fully backed up or satisfactorily sanctioned: this logic is overwhelmingly fallible to the point that it is hardly cogent, rendering the meaning-making of the entire enterprise particularly unstable. True feeling is supposedly what underwrites this apparent departure from monogamy in a show claiming to take monogamous, romantic lifetime commitment as its aim; protestations of love ostensibly save this exchange from resembling a casting couch, and the physical intimacy, in a circular sort of reasoning, supposedly guarantees those protestations.

In voice over that plays during the date, Harris claims, rather strenuously,

This is the first time in my life that I have been so attracted to somebody and so crazy about somebody on so many different levels. I am definitely falling in love with him . . . to fall in love with someone in this setting [the picturesque landscape of rural New Zealand] is the most amazing thing I could ever think of and I am so grateful for it.

This sort of overblown rhetoric seems to beg the question of whether the feelings of love generated in such a ridiculously artificial circumstance could possibly be "real." The question, endemic to reality television but too simple to be satisfying, casts authenticity as a constative matter: potentially true or false, requiring confirmation either way. Harris herself, however—in

a move Misha Kavka would applaud—points to the importance of the setting of these events, casting the affect involved as performative rather than constative: self-generative rather than prior and provable. By “setting,” she references most obviously the fantasy date’s romantic locale, but the “setting,” read more expansively, might include the entirety of the *Bachelor* experience, which is designed to produce the sort of effect Harris now describes, and to suborn the kind of performance she offers. In a later special called *The Bachelor: Then and Now*, Harris again describes the experience in a manner that recalls Kavka’s argument for performative affect:

A lot of people get criticized for being there for the wrong reasons and I don’t think I was there for the right reasons. Like, I don’t know why I was there. I can’t say I wanted to become famous. I don’t think I was there to fall in love. I wasn’t attracted to Jason right away . . . but there’s something to be said about the circumstances of the show, being sort of segregated and spending all your time thinking and focusing and talking about one person. You eventually just fall in love with—with the target.

Further, while she’s in the hot tub with “the target,” Harris once more, in voice over, foregrounds the performative nature of this intimacy, emphasizing the ways in which the set-up called the intimacy into being:

You know, it’s something to be said, when you’re in bathing suits, and you’re in water, and it’s dark, and there’s candles, and you’re this close to somebody and you’re holding hands . . . it’s hot.

On one hand, the show’s very grammar seems poised to insist that the feeling that fuels the show is not only real but spontaneous, discovered rather than produced, and that bodies are available to secure the bond of the potentially disingenuous words that say so. On the other, the performative aspect of the intimacy and affect the show both generates, through specific production choices, and displays seems undeniable—even Harris references it, if obliquely, when she speaks about the show’s events. The show uses the televisual’s power as a medium to grant

access to intimate acts, emphasizing how bodies can be *read* to guarantee the authenticity of professed emotion, even while a closer look at the show rather undoes that logic in favor of the performative generation Kavka suggests. Unsited to the evidentiary task they are so often assigned, the bodies of contestants (and the *Bachelor* himself) continue to perform as if they were, manufacturing the intimacy they are tasked with certifying as they go.

***Performing the “real” self: reality and realism.***

The question, of course, of how “real” participants’ performances of love, self, or anything else, might be depends on a referent that is very slippery, if it exists at all; how can we know this self except by observing the performances that constitute it? The logic of authentic self-revelation or performance of self insists on the same “stability of reference” Elin Diamond points out as necessary to realism: a knowable and recognizable real situated in an objectively observable world which can guarantee knowledge. Performance scholars have long troubled the idea of an authentic or essential interior self expressed through sincere actions in favor of a consideration of identity as performative: called into being through the practices that constitute it. The same argument, of course, may be levied against realism’s referent--that it is produced by rather than reflected in realistic performance: Diamond writes that the “lifelike stage sign” of realism “reinforces the epistemology of an ‘objective world,’” since the referent does not purely or separately exist, but rather is co-produced and “reaffirmed in the activity of reception” (366). If realism has a “fetishistic attachment” to a supposed “true referent,” so certainly does the performance of self on which romance, romantic reality shows, reality TV and even television

itself (its acting, the access and intimacy it promises) depend--and the correspondence this attachment implies is similarly problematic in all arenas.

Reality TV (including true-love shows) is not, of course, an example (at least not a good one) of the realism that Diamond describes, despite their reliance on the notion of authentic self-performance which similarly depends on the stable referent necessary for realism. In fact, to the extent that reality television's identity depends on being recognized as other than the cunning and absorbing illusion realism purports to serve up, it actively rejects certain tenets of realism. The genre's aims resonate, however, with realism in that it does construct illusion and artificiality and attempts to present it in the name of the real. In promising the real but failing to deliver the unvarnished thing itself, reality TV does not quite achieve either transparent access to the *real* or the particular stylized product of *realism*, presenting instead performances in the space between, which are conspicuously liminal and hybrid for a product often presented as simple or artless.

Some of the generic differences assumed between reality TV and the realism of scripted fare are fairly clear and effective, at least in presentation. In particular, realism's endeavor to produce a seamless illusion is countered by the constant assertion by reality TV promotion and its players themselves that what is being provided is a *show*: reality TV can announce itself in a way realist scripted entertainments do not. In most sub-genres, reality show participants frequently discuss their own participation in the specifically contrived situation of the show, throwing emphasis onto the show *as* show; there is no illusion at stake in terms of ignoring the show's frame--in fact, the frame, and the participants' clear awareness of it, is often the show's selling point. Much of what would be, for realism, moments of rupture are, for reality TV, just moments. For example, boom mike visible inside a shot would rupture the illusion of a realistic

soap opera, but might actually add to the credibility of a reality television show, depending on its sub-genre, as evidence of rawness and verité, a reminder of the immediate access the camera crews supposedly have to actual events. Visibility of at least certain of the seams, if not all of them, is fundamental to the genre's identity. Though reality TV certainly attempts to efface certain (sometimes major) elements of its construction, it employs a clear self-awareness that separates it from conventional realist fare.

On the other hand, reality television invests itself in all sorts of illusion-making/preserving. Though the show is known as such, and the performers constantly reference it, they must overlook a good deal of the apparatus around them in order to *seem* properly authentic, to grant the intimate access the genre promises. Though it often calls attention to its own seams and frameworks, there are certain aspects of its production it almost never advertises. On a practical level, casting procedures for reality television are not, apart from talent contest shows in which the audition process provides the shows' actual content, typically referenced within the shows, and the overwhelming beauty, youth, and whiteness of participants is rarely emphasized; rather, participants are implicitly presented as "regular people" (even when, as Rose and Woods note, some participants simultaneously take on notably archetypal "character" roles as villain or ingenue). Neither is the editing process or the content left behind in the editing room: these are artifacts of production and manipulation that the shows pointedly do not emphasize, seams that should not show and are not displayed. The narratives by which the shows organize the content they share are presented as found rather than constructed even when their construction exceeds editing room choices and is the result of collusion with producers, sometimes in ways that do evoke the manipulations of the quiz show scandals I referenced earlier: past *Survivor* winner

Richard Hatch admitted after his victory that the devious-strategist persona that he adopted for the show, for example, was not only a role he strategically assumed, but one architected and contrived by producers, constituting a manipulation on behalf of producers that would almost certainly be considered significant (Andrejevic 214).

A notable exception to some of this attempted effacement is the increasing popularity of after-shows and postmortems (including the *Bachelor* special referenced earlier), during which unaired segments are sometimes broadcast and reality TV participants are given the opportunity to speak freely about the “behind the scenes” events of an episode after the fact. This “backstage” access is rather like what reality television itself promised in its generic novelty--real access to real people being real. These postmortems shift this burden from the shows themselves on to the equivalents of “making-of” specials, announcing reality content as artificial and curated enough to require its own exposés. I do not mean to suggest a naive viewer who is unaware that reality shows are heavily produced until behind-the-scenes programming suggests it, but rather to point to ways in which the genre itself contends with its antagonistic commitments.

Reality TV is explicit, at certain moments, about the manufacture of the bizarre situations it calls into being--there is nothing natural about the *Big Brother* house itself, for all it seems to suggest itself as a laboratory for the study of human nature--but it still promotes the real that serves as its generic referent as somehow naturally occurring, *discoverable* rather than produced. (Realist theater is less explicit about the bizarreness of its situation, but treats its referent similarly despite the ways in which the “real” is reified, not discovered, in its productions.) In fact, the tortured and contrived scenarios that fuel it are often, subtly or less so, presented as



strictures that will themselves enforce or catalyze unavoidably “real” behavior: constant surveillance (*The Real World, Big Brother*), removal to a “primitive” living situation in an exotic and undeveloped locale (*Survivor*), or, more subtly, contests sufficiently scary (*Fear Factor*), arduous (*Amazing Race*), meaningful (*The Bachelor*), or potentially career-making (*American Idol, Top Chef, Project Runway*) that the grueling and fraught competitive process can claim to strip away any inauthentic layers to reveal participants’ true colors. The participants’ behavior is suggested as authentic despite the blatantly artificial construction of their environment and, indeed, the whole enterprise--or even because of it, as when involved and sometimes ridiculous scenarios like the ones described above exist as a means of displaying and drawing out “natural” behavior or “real” selves: your real self is revealed, the logic goes, when you are pushed to the limit--when enduring tests of will on *Fear Factor*, or working at impossible tasks under incredible pressures in *Project Runway*. In these cases, artificiality and construction are leveraged to *produce* the authenticity and realness to which they supposedly stand in opposition.

Too, as concerns the performer-participants, the importance of “being real” is not absolute; Andrejevic suggests that it registers differently in different programs sub-genres. Specifically, he suggests that in shows from which audience members may “reject” contestants by voting them out or withholding votes that might keep them in competition, like in his *Big Brother* example, behavior that is perceived as authentic is often rewarded, while in other sub-genres, participants seen engaging in manipulation or dissembling--Richard Hatch’s persona on *Survivor* might be a good example--may become audience favorites, and even champions (cite). On one hand, his distinction implies, that even when perceived authenticity is not necessarily the highest good, it is always a consideration; participants’ “realness” remains a preoccupation of

viewers even when those viewers particularly enjoy apparently wily dissembling rather than what seems straightforward honesty. Viewer strategies may sometimes reward seemingly authentic behavior and sometimes involve a celebration of displays of *inauthenticity*, but a consistent concern with this axis of judgment suggests that fundamental to any participant's "show persona" is the extent to which she is considered honest and authentic or manipulative and calculating. Even when "being real" (read: sincere, authentic, honest) is not necessarily required of participants for viewer enjoyment, it or its absence is consistently *evaluated*.

On the other hand, it seems that even when reality TV participant behavior reads as disingenuous or strategic, it is positioned as somehow *sincerely* so, at least in opposition to the explicit dissembling of theatrical performance. At the very least, reality television show participants' actions on camera correlate with their off-camera selves without the buffer of character. Those who behave in a manner read as inauthentic may also be understood as "just that kind of person," *sincerely* strategic or manipulative *for real*, their essential personal identity that of a phony or a schemer. Reality TV's promise of scriptlessness gives its promoters leave to suggest that participants' performances are indicative of their "real" personalities, even when those performances are patently inauthentic. Moreover, Andrejevic himself points out that even those participants who *are* appreciated as real or authentic often must engage in all kinds of tacit dissembling in order to appear so, starting with ignoring (or appearing to) the myriad weirdnesses involved in taking part in a show like *Big Brother*: "the cameras, the contrived challenges . . . and, above all, the fact that cast members were embarked on an encounter with celebrity" were certainly not hidden from viewers, but were expected not to inhibit cast members from behaving as they would *without* cameras (130). The participants, in other words, are

expected to be real even when a “real” response to the the situation at hand might be guardedness or a strategic performance of self that is more complex than simple honesty. Though the genre is quite explicit with viewers about the odd scenarios into which it places many of its participants, those most applauded for “being real” are often those seemingly able to ignore all manner of “real” circumstance, behaving “normally” in an environment that is anything but.

One might say the same thing of actors engaged in realist performance inside a theater (or, for that matter, on a film or television set): part of their skill is in effacing the artificiality of their environment enough to achieve a realistic performance. Stanislavski called for a kind of “public solitude” in his acting students, achieved via a moveable “circle of attention” that could expand or contract in order to admit or omit the larger situation of the actor from the mix.

Within the circle of attention, “as in your own home, there is no one to fear and nothing to be ashamed of. There you can forget the fact that in the darkness, on every side, many strange eyes are watching you living” (99). Stanislavski warns that the implications of an actor’s publicness, the presence of an audience, and her own awareness of the artificiality of her environment could--and must--be controlled, or at least managed, by diligent concentration--otherwise, they are inevitably and necessarily corrupting influences. Stanislavski warns that the actor unable to achieve this kind of public privacy--unable to ignore the very real artifacts of the theatrical situation--will never produce sufficiently realistic stage behavior: such an actor “has a nervous compulsion to please the audience, to display himself and to conceal his state of mind by posturing so as to amuse them” (296). Stanislavski’s realism *requires* the sort of willfully selective attention (I recognize this but not that; I register this influence and ignore that one) that Mark Andrejevic points out reality stars who wish to appear “real” must cultivate. Although the

difference is not absolutely distinct, what Stanislavski suggests as a technique for realism Andrejevic suggests as something of a hypocrisy for a genre supposedly predicated on the real.

This technique is related to other skills used to manage similar paradoxes in Stanislavski's system, like the artificial production of natural behavior and emotion, and theatrical dissembling that, despite its fundamental commitment to illusion, must ring with a "feeling of truth." As I have already noted, Stanislavski used the phrase (translated as) "feeling of truth" to describe performance that was sufficiently authentic. Opposed to this "feeling of truth" is "lies, wronghood and playacting," "stock-in-trade," "histrionics"--performance that is not only insufficiently skilled in terms of nuance--ham-handed or broad--but, in his logic, also insufficient in that it fails to ground the make-believe of theater, its acts of patent dishonesty, in the supposed truth of the actor's "real experiencing" (*Work* 194, 166). His explicit opposition of good acting to "lies" highlights the truth-value that such acting is expected to reflect under this paradigm: though theatrically false by definition, it succeeds when it appears authentic to an audience. The general paradox of artificially engineering the "feeling of truth"--the appearance, if not the "fact," of honesty, authenticity, or nature--is rarely confronted by Stanislavski in his writing; rather, he discusses all manner of ways in which the natural, the true and the real can be suborned, engineered, or cultivated--without losing the name of nature.

In examining this logic, I believe it necessary to emphasize certain of Stanislavski's words, or at least the words of his translators.<sup>35</sup> While his overwhelming dependence on supposedly universally known quantities like "truth" and "nature" is undeniable and problematic,

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<sup>35</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, I rely almost totally on Jean Benedetti's various translations of Stanislavski, particularly the recent *An Actor's Work*, although he is neither the only nor the first to attribute the English terms "feeling" or "sense of truth," or "real experiencing," to Stanislavski's precepts.

the distinction between something like absolute truthfulness and the “feeling of truth” he charges the actor with marshaling seems a fertile one (if largely unaddressed by Stanislavski himself). His specific references (again, in translation) to a “feeling” or “sense” of truth point to an appreciation of the actor’s work as requiring not necessarily the ontology of actuality—that it be *real*—or absolute truth, but rather that it be sufficiently informed by nature (for Stanislavski, a cognate to that which is real and honest) to carry traces of the natural and spontaneous despite the meticulous staging and production which render it necessarily artificial. By “production” I refer not only to the literal staging of a theatrical performance, which is itself an artificiality with which any instance of realism contends, but to the artificial system of affective or emotional procurement within the actor which Stanislavski suggests is often required to produce, successfully, the “feeling of truth”:

It is always best when an actor is completely taken over by the play. Then, independent of his will, he lives the role, without noticing *how* he is feeling, not thinking about *what* he is doing, and so everything comes out spontaneously, subconsciously. But, unfortunately, this is not always within our power to control . . . you have to learn how to stimulate and control [nature] . . . arouse and involve the creative subconscious by indirect, conscious means (*Work* 17).

In the first mode or register of theatrical performance Stanislavski describes above, the actor is “completely taken over” and requires no system or psychotechnique to produce a suitably “truthful” performance; an actor is able to rely on actions which occur instinctively or habitually to her without grooming or cultivating an artificial state of being. In plainer language, the necessary actions and affect happen “naturally,” or at least without conscious manipulation, in a patently unnatural circumstance.

The second, however, points to a trickier proposition: the artificial process by which a suitably “natural” response can be suborned or procured, a system capable of marshaling

authentic affect. At one point, Stanislavski--through his alter ego, the acting teacher Tortsov--compares the ways in which a “natural” response is “arouse[d]” by “indirect, conscious means” to “prepar[ing] the soil,” cultivating and managing nature in order to encourage it to yield the desired response. He resorts to other metaphors involving the natural world, similarly comparing the conscious development of the facility to adjust or stimulate a natural response to the way forces of nature like electricity and wind require “a knowledgable and intelligent engineer to control them so people can use them” (17-18). Stanislavski’s apparent insistence that nature can be so adjusted and managed without losing the name of the natural is reflected throughout his writings on his psychotechnique. Similarly, he frequently uses “truth” (its apparently absolute nature often, but not always, softened by the qualification “a sense of” or “feeling of”) in seeming reference to that which is aptly approximated, stage action that is “well-founded, in proper, logical sequence and possible in the real world” (48). Just as the natural can be artificially cultivated, in Stanislavski’s eyes, theatrical actions can be “true,” or at least carry the traces of truthfulness, *if* the dissembling of the actor is actually the “real experiencing” of a fictional situation. To turn the phrase of Lauren Conrad, it’s not lying to anyone; it’s just the way realists do realism. Just as Conrad’s real can admit manipulation and staging without losing the name of realness, Stanislavski allows for his system to create “real experiencing” and “truthful” stage behavior out of the artifice of theater.

In suggesting how to produce “truth,” or truthful, genuine stage action, Stanislavski points again and again to the importance of the real. While he is somewhat cagey, in his writings, about the precise meaning or nature of the truth he exalts--particularly in how the “sense of” truth produced by “real experiencing” might differ from masterful approximation (say,

Shepherd's mimicry)--he illustrates its power and value in an anecdote that labelled "Belief and the Sense of Truth": in it, members of the allegorical acting class he has introduced are looking for a student's lost handbag before the start of class. As they conduct this search on stage, their teacher announces:

"The picture-frame stage and the glare of the footlights reveal what is happening so well. You were really experiencing what you were doing while you were looking [for the handbag]. Everything was truthful, we could believe everything. The small physical tasks were performed with precision, they had definition and clarity, attention was sharp. The Elements we need for creative work were functioning properly and harmoniously . . . In a word, a real work of art was being created on stage," was the unexpected conclusion he made.

"No . . . How could it be art? It was reality, a genuine truth, a 'common-place event' as you call it," the students objected.

"Repeat this 'event'." (Ellipses preserved from Benedetti's translation)

The students replace the found handbag in its discovered location, and then begin to *act*, "to look for something that had already been found and no longer needed to be looked for" (152).

The approximation is, in Stanislavski/Tortsov's eyes, a miserable failure, in which there exists no "genuine truth." The students excuse their poor approximation as inevitable, explaining that "The first time it was genuine but the second time it was a counterfeit, a representation, a lie." Tortsov asks why they cannot then "play looking for the handbag without lies, just with truth," explaining that absent the exigencies, obstacles and consequences of "real life," acting requires the "*creation of truth and belief*" in order that the theatrical performance may be suffused with the same authenticity as the actual event (153, italics mine). He suggests that the way to "truth,"

on stage, is for the stage action that constitutes a virtual reality to be *as* informed--dictated, even--by necessity and circumstance as actual, off-stage behavior is.<sup>36</sup>

My point is that Stanislavski's realism attempts to produce and effect the real in a way that evokes the processes of reality television: it claims to spur the natural into happening artificially in rather the same way that *The Bachelor* claims to provoke spontaneous romantic attraction or that *The Real World* suggests that within its surveillance chamber, things will finally "start getting real." Like the work of Stanislavski's actor, reality TV performances might be framed as artificially stimulated and controlled "nature," at least insofar as they manipulate the actual (a body, its actual affective response) into a representation that effaces (some) evidence of that manipulation, leaving a product recognizable as authentic "enough" rather than falsely contrived. The "indirect, conscious means" by which a Stanislavskian actor stimulates and controls nature resembles, as a strategy for producing realness, the artificial manipulations that render reality television from raw actuality while maintaining a "sense" or "feeling" of authenticity.

However, earlier in the chapter, I argued that reality TV viewers may not be seeking authenticity, but seeking an experience of liminality, one that introduces the notion, however obliquely, that they themselves may *not* be savvy arbitrators of what is real, that indeed there may not be a dependable distinction between the artificial and the natural, the staged and the

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<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Pitches has written about Stanislavski's dependence on the logical sequence of action for the approximation of believable representation; Pitches sees in this an affinity with Newtonian ideas of causality, which he believes undergird Stanislavski's prioritization of motivation and logical order. Pitches argues that the world of a play is, for Stanislavski, deterministic in a Newtonian sense: "Laws of motion govern the progress of a character and the actions of a play; tasks propel a character through action, hindered by obstacles which are overcome" (36).



spontaneous, or the sincere and the feigned. These viewers are not after a picture of authenticity that can allow them to suspend their disbelief, but a circumstance that puts belief into question and allows them to explore an exciting unknown rather than docile viewer's obedient naiveté or the savvy viewer's eye-rolling certainty. Authenticity, I should repeat, is not always viewers' holy grail.

After all, the overtly false “histrionics” that Stanislavski characterizes as inauthentic seem, admittedly, to be staples of reality television programming. In particular, dramatic episodes of bad behavior are one of the genre's (apparently) compelling titillations, and the potential for that bad behavior to be perceived as theatrical or strategic rather than perfectly authentic seems high. Overt theatricality, disingenuousness and manipulative behavior are often recognized by viewers, however, through their perceived difference from authenticity, marking it as an important, if flexible and mysterious, criterion. I argue that this game of categorizing behavior (particularly spectacular behavior, like the fights, shouting matches and tearful breakdowns the genre is increasingly known for) as either authentic or not is similar to the “spoiling” practice I described earlier (that is, combing the shows for continuity errors and other improbabilities): the small or temporary certainty granted by confidently locating inauthenticity must also remind viewers, if only subtly, the inevitable instability of such judgments.

Mark Andrejevic, after recounting an example from the show *Big Brother*, writes that when it comes to judging authenticity, “the gaze of the viewer comes to stand as the litmus test of whether characters are being ‘real’ or not” (178). He describes at length how an individual contestant on the show, “Jamie,” was criticized by fans, other contestants and television critics

for a refusal to self-disclose that translated to, in viewers' eyes, a suspiciously "managed" presentation of self, a point of difference from her more open, more "honest" housemates. While not an example of "bad behavior" or "histrionics," her strategic refusal to discuss certain topics while under surveillance in the *Big Brother* house, as well as her apparent concern for both her literal appearance and her "image," are factors that presented her as lacking authenticity and "compromised her ability to 'be real.'" Jamie became, in other words, just as phony as the actors whose absence was part of the guarantee of reality made during the show's premier episode ("no professional actors, no scripts, no second takes")." In fact, Jamie's stated ambition to become an actor may have contributed to her unpopularity on the show, as her lack of self-disclosure was read as an attempt to control or "contrive her [self-]portrayal on the show" in the interest of her career. Andrejevic highlights the hypocrisy of fans' opprobrium by pointing out that, in their view, "Once Jamie decides to sacrifice her privacy in order to become a 'reality' celebrity, she should behave as if she isn't at all interested in celebrity" (128). Perhaps more importantly, he notes pithily that when the best strategy for success in the *Big Brother* contest is to appear to abjure strategic game-playing in favor of a supposedly transparent sincerity, "reality [has] itself become a strategy,"<sup>37</sup> both for winning the game at the heart of *Big Brother* and for playing sympathetically to an audience presumed to be searching for authentic performance of self (127). "Being real" is choosing to perform realness instead of something else, making it less the naked disingenuousness it desires to appear as than one strategic choice among many.

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<sup>37</sup> Though Andrejevic does not connect them, his remark about reality as a strategy brings to mind Slavoj Žižek's declaration of "the thrill of the Real as the ultimate 'effect,' sought after from digitalized special effects, through reality TV and amateur photography, up to snuff movies" (12).

For Stanislavski, too, the appearance of honesty and sincerity is the ultimate strategy, and one given the name of truth and realness. Though he insists on realness and truth in his writing, the point of his technique is to systematize its manufacture. His style of acting, although it seems often (at least in contemporary practice) to abjure the name of style in favor of plain, self-evident verisimilitude or life-likeness, is just that: the strategic mobilization of the markers of realness and authenticity. Its very systematicity emphasizes it not as artless, but highly crafted: tactical, agented, goal-based (although part of realism's goal is self-effacement). Rather than implicating the audience as the arbiters of realness, however, as Andrejevic positions them, Stanislavski implies that the actor him- or herself must be charged with ensuring that performances carry the necessary "feeling of truth"--which will then, supposedly, be apparent without exception to an undifferentiated, universal audience: "Everything the actor does and the audience sees," he wrote, "must be imbued with the feeling of truth and sanctioned by it" (194).

Given reality TV's generic opposition to conventional television programs which make heavy use of realist acting techniques--that is, reality TV's apparent distaste for realism in favor of the real, its promise to deliver the real that realism cannot--the resonances and overlaps between the two genre/styles deserve attention. Since the difference between the un-forced, unrehearsed actual and the artificially staged, is, to risk reduction, the promised ontological difference between reality television and scripted shows, finding traces of realism's *modus operandi* within the performance of the promised real undoes some of the distance reality TV attempts to place between itself and scripted entertainments that depend on realism. While Kavka's suggestion that affect, in particular, is performative in reality TV provides a model for understanding the genre's presentations outside a binary that opposes natural or genuine behavior

to a fraudulent simulation that could be said to resemble theatrical “acting,” reality television is often considered in light of just this kind of axis, one that pits the real-seeming against the observably false, valorizing the former--especially when it comes to participant performances. At the very least, reality television requires this kind of separation for its recognition as other-than-scripted and realer-than-realism, which makes it interesting that reality TV, though it promises access to the real, actually trades on certain propositions of the realism it seems to reject. The performance of reality television is therefore one at odds with itself, one that explicitly rejects realism in favor of the real even as it shares some of realism’s strategies for re-constituting or impersonating the real. In perhaps the same way that Feuer suggests that liveness is no longer television’s ontology, but it remains its ideology, the real is not the ontology of realness or realism, but it constitutes the ideology of both.

***Conclusion: hope for the “vicious decimator.”***

The *New York Times* television critic Ginia Bellafante characterized *The Hills* as “above all a vicious decimator of hope. It mocks our hearts; it plays with our allegiances, and we welcome the abuse.” It is admittedly difficult to focus on the implications--productive and potentially exciting ones, I argue--of the show’s generic innovations while constantly reminded of its vapid content and untroubled picture of normalized privilege. Without ignoring what is troublesome about the show and its genre, much less positing either as a utopian site, I suggest there is something hopeful to take away from an analysis of it. When considered alongside the strategies viewers use to enjoy *The Hills*, the show might model, rather than the hopeless and silly hypermediated dystopia Bellafante suggests, a liminal ground in which realness and its

others can be unopposed and differently figured, no less than in the *Hamlet* described in the last chapter. Further, I see in viewer reception of the show a complex understanding of agency that co-exists with subjection to cultural codes and norms. By that I mean that the viewers I describe, the ones experimenting with the instability of the real, likely consider themselves real and authentic, but they have also demonstrated a fascination with those notions as uncertain and potentially co-incident with artificiality, theatricality, and even fraudulence. That competence might allow for an understanding of lives, positions and identities as themselves heavily produced and manipulated, and also of those acts of production as the grounds for pleasure and opportunity rather than a “vicious decimator of hope”: a site of excitement and potential rather than a sort of Baudrillardian desert of the real suffused with loss and threat, on where the comfort of the real has been replaced with the despair that attends its impossibility, a *Matrix* suffused with malevolent illusion. The produced, constructed or staged self, in the model I propose viewers are experimenting with, can be other than a fraudulent self; rather, a creative and exciting one, possibly even one that evokes the pleasure Donna Haraway calls for cyborgs to take in “the confusion of boundaries” that (fail to) distinguish the natural from the artificial. *The Hills*, in a sense, transgresses these boundaries as well; if not precisely between human and machine, certainly between what Haraway calls the “troubling dualisms” of “reality/appearance . . . [and] truth/illusion” (35). She suggests that “[a] cyborg world”—our world, in and out of *The Hills*, since Haraway persuasively insists that the cyborg is already our ontology —“might be about lived social realities in which people are not afraid . . . of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” (13). The pleasurable practice of negotiating authenticity for a “real life,” one that is overwhelmingly mapped and indexed by existing and

repeating codes and citations, may be friendly to an understanding of the scripted nature of non-televised (if often surveilled) daily performances, the constant and contrived citation of cultural norms. If reality television can be a genre that complicates rather than flattens and discards notions of realness, perhaps viewers can turn a spoiling lens onto their own lived experience, in which the idea of “scripted reality” might describe not only a new televisual genre but a recognition of a mixed quotidian reality which offers the same potential for exciting liminality.

### *CHAPTER THREE: PLAYFUL ALTERNATE REALITIES AND REALLY ALTERED PLAYERS*

#### *Introduction.*

Alternate reality gaming is a site ripe for investigations of the ways realness is produced, recognized, and signified. Like the practices and products investigated within the other chapters, this type of gaming is a site in which the distinction between that which is “real,” on the one hand, and that which is fictional, mimetic, mediatized or represented is disturbed. In the pages that follow, I will demonstrate the ways in which alternate reality games (ARGs) depend on a superimposition of a game reality on quotidian reality (not unlike the concomitant clear artificiality and claimed actuality of reality TV content), at times necessarily blurring an easy distinction between players’ in-game and out-of-game experience. *World Without Oil*, an alternate reality game designed by Jane McGonigal and Ken Eklund and played internationally by nearly two thousand gamers in 2007, makes an excellent case study for the examination of the possibilities of mixed reality in gaming. As I will discuss, *World Without Oil* is particularly suited for an exploration of mixed realities in gaming practice in part due to the openness of its structure and the degree to which autonomous player activity directed and fueled the game. Where “conventional” ARGs (a genre or form which I will define and contextualize at length later in this chapter) present clues toward a mysterious narrative that players to piece together cooperatively, McGonigal and Eklund presented an open, explicitly fictional scenario (although the actuality of finite oil supply and high fuel prices added urgency to the fiction) and asked players to construct their own, personal response to an imagined reality through the practice of acting “as-if” the oil shock were real. In *World Without Oil*, players were challenged to focus,

develop and communicate their imagined personal realities. Players innovated their own virtual and actual reactions to the game scenario, creating not a central unified narrative but a multi-vocal response that was both collage and conversation, in which players' quotidian lives and in-game realities became deeply imbricated. The gravity and plausibility of the game scenario also made players' subjunctive experience--their exploration of the game's as-if and the actual strategies they innovated for contending with it--particularly meaningful.

McGonigal, in her book *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change The World*, called the game "a life-changing six-week experiment: a collaborative simulation designed to find out what would happen if demand for oil did eventually outstrip our supply, and what we could collectively do about it" (Kindle Locations 4944-4945). The game's tag line—"Play it before you live it"—emphasized the what-if nature of the game: players were encouraged to explore what would change in their own realities in the event of a massive--and sudden--oil shortage. *World Without Oil* is an intriguing example of what happens when games break out of the boundaries that usually characterize gameplay, or when those boundaries are unstable, porous or difficult to locate. Games become, at least in a theoretical sense, more dangerous or powerful when their transgression of traditional distinctions between play and not-play result in a sort of liminality of frame or category, an ontological muddiness. The safe oppositions of real/not real, actual/virtual, authentic/constructed, sincere/dissembling are dismantled in favor of a blurry, blended context of mixed reality. The *World Without Oil* experience was particularly effective at this dismantling, blurring boundaries between players' in-game and out-of-game experiences in a potent way. As such, it makes an intriguing case study for this dissertation's continued investigation into staging authenticity and realness in mediatized



contexts, and in particular, what possibilities might inhere in the porous, uncertain boundaries that separate the “real” from what is theatrically or virtually “false.”

### ***The world of World Without Oil.***

After McGonigal and Eklund spread word of the game’s launch, the *World Without Oil* website went live on April 30, 2007. The site featured “fictional news stories, video reports, and economic indicators,” but also served as a locus or clearing house for the player-created content so important to the game: player blogs, video diaries and emails that communicated the realities players were imagining, and their strategies for countenancing it. During each day of game play, the design team doled out details or twists to stimulate participant imaginations and provoke reactions to the changing crisis: news of virtual

rolling brownouts from oil-dependent power companies; airlines canceling flights and dramatically raising the cost of tickets; empty shelves and food shortages due to inability of deliveries to be made to local stores. In return, players told us about difficulties dealing with unreliable power at home; business travelers getting stranded in other countries when airports unexpectedly shut down; public transportation overcrowding in towns and cities with previously underutilized systems; a disruptive uptick in work-from-home days; the rise of bicycle thefts and a new bicycle black market; impromptu homeschooling as a result of gas shortages in suburban and rural areas; and neighborhood pot-luck meals to deal with the food shortage. (*Reality* Kindle Locations 5006-5011)

It also became apparent that the game world would run on an accelerated timeline: one real-world day would equal a week of in-game time, giving the scenario thirty-two virtual “weeks” to play out.

Where past ARGs had relied on the mechanic of using collective and networked intelligence to piece together a mysterious narrative supplied (in hidden and broken form) by game designers, *World Without Oil* harnessed the spirit of gameplay and the possibilities of

cooperative intelligence to innovate solutions to a complex and likely, if fictional, problem. Videos, stories, diary entries and images were submitted by players who were countenancing, however virtually, the disruption of an energy crisis as it might affect them, or as it might affect individuals they could imagine themselves to be. Many of the stories participants told of their “experiences” during the fictional oil shortage were fictional accountings of a possible, virtual reality--yarns spun from the “what if” imaginings of players exploring the possible implications of the shortage. At the conclusion of the game, one player wrote

There were stories I wanted to send in and didn't have time to write, like the rebirth of the latino [sic] corridor and how much they helped the rest of us, the adopt-an-elder (and save precious knowledge) program, the recall and replacement of easily half the elected politicians, how nice it would be to have a milk-goat in the back garden, and giant shifts in California agriculture and irrigation practices. (intwoworlds)

However, players also responded to imagined scarcity by changing their actual habits: by carpooling, lowering consumption, considering alternate power sources, etc. Some of the player-produced content pointed to practical change in players’ daily lives inspired by the imagined game circumstances:

As for me, in this here and now, I'm a different person thanks to WWO. I'm much more aware of the fragile thread that supports the lifestyle I and others keep. I'm making changes, but there's a long way to go. But I AM changing, and that means that for me, WWO was a success. (MTALON)

I really mean it when I say WWO changed my life. I really have been using my cloth bags at the stores, walking more/driving less, turning off lights, and, yes, recycling. My friends, family and coworkers have all noticed the difference. In all seriousness, this entire thing has made me a different person. (WWO player fallingintosin, qtd in *Reality* Kindle Locations 5062-5064).

Players were challenged, sometimes via specific missions and challenges, not just to imagine the changes spurred by a global oil shock, but to “start making changes and testing adaptive solutions for real” (*Broken* Kindle Locations 4972-4973). Some other actual “adaptive

solutions” self-reported by gamers involved transportation and food production alternatives--carpooling, biking, gardening and foodshares.

***Pervasive and immersive games: a brief genealogy.***

The opportunity ARGs provide for players to act as if a fictional scenario were actual is a vital, and sometimes contested, aspect of these games. Gabriella Giannachi and Steve Benford include alternate reality games with augmented reality games and pervasive games in a category of gaming experience that “aim[s] to unchain the player from the spatial and temporal constraints of the fixed console and instead move the gaming experience out into the real world” (264). Unchained in this manner, players and game play itself integrate with non-game space and time to the extent that any supposed boundary separating the two may become questionable, flexible, or unstable--may fail to separate games from non-game or ordinary experience. How we can know when, where and if games are being played--questions necessary to interrogate any “real” when fictional, virtual and mischievous gameplay is afoot--becomes less clear in a milieu that includes games that not only escape a console, but fail to respect multiple boundaries used to contain, categorize and identify gameplay.

In order to contextualize the questions and opportunities that such games present, I offer a genealogy of games studies that situates pervasive and immersive games, and ARGs most specifically, in a critical context. Gaming is a distinct mode of performance, one which has and continues to be investigated according to theories specific to its form. While performance theory more generally certainly applies to alternate reality games I discuss in this chapter--McGonigal, in her doctoral dissertation, compares them persuasively to theater--game studies provides

insight into the form's possibilities through its own theories and perspectives. Jesper Juul argued in a landmark address at the Digital Arts and Culture conference in 2000 that

[W]e need a separate theory of games. We need a theory that isn't just interactive bits and pieces tacked on to narratology or dramaturgy. We lack a theoretical understanding of what games are and can, and how they relate to the narrative media such as the novel or the movie. We lack the tools to evaluate and place a computer game both historically and in relation to other games.

The specific genealogy I draw in the following section is by no means exhaustive as a history or critical consideration of gameplay, but it offers a grounding necessary for an exploration of contemporary gaming in mixed reality contexts. By examining *World Without Oil*, other ARGs and other pervasive and immersive games (admittedly contested terms--especially the latter--which I intend to both define and trouble) in the context of the emerging field of game studies, I will discover what the field's own theories illuminate about the practice of this particular form of performance.

Scholars and critics have struggled, as the popularity of digital games rises precipitously, both for the recognition of games studies as a legitimate field and to define what such a field would include. How to constitute games studies, a field that had not yet formally coalesced, was a question that often placed those who saw video and computer games as wholly, essentially different from pre-digital games in opposition to those who desired to bring the pre-digital theories and observations of Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois and others to bear on newer gaming practices. More significantly, the emerging field struggled to develop theoretical lenses and methodologies specific to gaming, and specific to gaming in its newer, digital forms. This struggle was often in a response to a perceived incursion of humanities scholars from other disciplines eager to analyze games as pieces of narrative or cinema rather than as a distinct form

of their own. Whether or not games could properly be understood as narratives was an especially contested and divisive question: debates between ludologists like Juul, who sought to study games qua games, and “narratologists” (the moniker seems to have been coined by the ludologists and was almost certainly not meant as a compliment) who desired to bring the analytical tools and lenses of their own fields to bear on digital and video gaming as the new practices grew in popularity. The ludologist/narratologist debates became quite heated, especially as concerned what many saw as ludologists’ strict resistance to critical perspectives from outside the gaming world. Matters were perhaps at their most divisive when Markku Eskelinen reduced the debates to the following jab: “Luckily, outside theory, people are usually excellent at distinguishing between narrative situations and gaming situations: if I throw a ball at you, I don’t expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories” (36). Years later, Juul defended the ludologists from the charge of resistance to interdisciplinarity by remarking on his blog, “I don’t think anybody ever spoke against using any methods from other disciplines? The whole thing was always against simply putting games into a preexisting box called “narrative” and ignoring everything that didn’t fit . . . The strong anti-narrative thing came from the fact that this was the default humanities response to *everything* in the late 1990’s [sic]” (*Ludologists*).

While some (often productive) tension still exists between those who approach the study of games from perspectives of other fields and those invested in carving out scholarly territory for the study of games without reliance, particularly, on the vocabularies of film and narrative studies, games studies has evolved as an area of study capable of sustaining both modes of inquiry. Innovative work from scholars like Espen Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca, and Juul has been indispensable to an investigation, for example, of the specific possibilities and characteristics of video and computer gaming. Work from performance studies scholars like Jane McGonigal and

Ian Bogost have explored not only games' intersection performance but what the particular perspective of performance studies illuminates about game play more largely construed.

Certainly this chapter, which examines gaming practices through the lens of performance, is a product of some clear resonances between games studies, theater studies and performance studies.

As games scholars innovated theories of play, reception and design focused around new gaming technologies and practices, tension also remained between those who preferred to look back to the theories of Huizinga and other scholars who took up games in a pre-digital time, and others who suggested an ontological separation between older games and the video and computer games that were attracting critical attention in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. In a book review published in the first issue of the online journal *Games Studies*, Juul argued for a study of games that focussed less on a historical continuum than on (then) contemporary digital games and gaming practices. Fundamental to his argument was that the newer games were widely published and more or less consistently played (as opposed, say, to the many rule variants of certain card or party games), and therefore locatable and citable in a way that non-mediatised games were not. These newer games, he wrote, are “quotable objects that can be listed as references,” giving them, supposedly, greater weight and utility as objects of study. Juul was presenting digital video and computer games as more stable texts, one might say, that prior gaming practices, largely due to their mediatised nature, which granted them, if not permanence, arguably more reliable iterability and citationality: the action of playing of games, like performance, is fleeting, but *Halo 2* and *Tomb Raider*, at least, offered (in Juul's view) standard, archivable “texts” that lent themselves to academic analysis in a way that, say, card or party games with less obviously archivable records of play (and myriad regional, generational and

other differences in rules and style) did not.

Though the playing of any game, like any instance of performance, is difficult to cite, repeat or archive, Juul saw an important difference in these games, which at the very least featured the regularity common to mass-produced commodities.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, performance studies scholar McGonigal disagrees with Juul's 2001 stance, arguing that the theories of pre-digital gaming offered by Huizinga and others are not only rich resources for the study of gaming per se, but that their "analog" or pre-digital nature may be useful for scholars and designers who seek to understand games as other than "quotable objects"--that is, as *just as* fleeting, ephemeral and difficult to document as we know performance (and forms of gaming which lend themselves to less stable artifacts than, say, video games) to be. McGonigal is herself a designer of games which make use of media but cannot be confined to a screen, which are widely played but not commercially published; these games are characterized by a certain mischievous unwillingness to be located. Although McGonigal, a game designer and performance studies scholar, does not make the point explicitly, Juul's suggestion that games become more study-able, or more worthy of study, when they become easier to reference ties their value, at least as objects of analysis, to their persistence, uniformity, and availability, and suggests, in turn, less value for gaming practices which are ephemeral, dispersed or variable. McGonigal refrains from taking umbrage with Juul's apparent de-valuing of forms of play/performance whose instability make them less easy to cite, but does point to pre-digital (McGonigal's term) works from scholars like Dutch historian Johan Huizinga as useful for those who would study contemporary games that are not nearly as bounded, consistent or stable as the digital games Juul suggested in 2001 should be the basis of contemporary game studies.

Huizinga's 1938 *Homo Ludens* survives as a foundational and canonical text for games scholars, at least for those who admit no absolute ontological distinction between older games and contemporary digital or mediatized games. Huizinga proceeds from the thesis that humans are specifically and necessarily playful; in a nod toward Linnaeus' taxonomy, the book's very title suggests play (*ludens*) not only as inherent to human existence, but as supplanting reason (*sapiens*) as primary in the list of characteristics that define the species. Huizinga attempted to articulate a theory of play as foundational--and prior--to the formation of culture, calling it the "primaeval soil" out of which "law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science" developed (5).<sup>38</sup>

One concept introduced by Huizinga has remained of particular interest (and some considerable controversy) to contemporary games scholars: his description of a "magic circle," inside of which play, which is "distinct from ordinary life both as to locality and duration," occurs (9). Though he suggests a temporal boundary as well, Huizinga's magic circle uses a primarily spatial metaphor to differentiate playful acts from serious ones. For Huizinga,

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. . . . The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (10)

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<sup>38</sup> Although Huizinga's work in *Homo Ludens* tends to treat both "humans" and "play" as known and immanent universals, it is notable for its attempts to theorize play qua play, without suggesting the practice of play as "merely" a biological or psychological imperative in the service of some other more practical function.



Huizinga's "magic circle" theorizes important separation for games, effectively isolating them from ordinary, non-game space and time. He writes that play is "a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own," one which anchors its existence in its separation from the quotidian. For Huizinga, play has meaning--indeed, *exists*--only insofar as it is separable from ordinary life and behavior.

In this, the magic circle is something like the proscenium of a theater: a boundary that signals where the make-believe ends. It separates that which is playful, or insincere, or "merely" mimetic from what is ordinary, sincere, real. The stability and legibility of that signal or boundary, then, is of great importance, not only for the constitution of a category called "play" but for the necessary ability to distinguish play from "ordinary" activity, a distinction which affects the context, value and consequences of actions.

### ***Locating theatricality and playfulness.***

The idea that the "as-if" of make-believe, in the context of theater or in play, might not be distinct, or might not be *distinguishable*, from "ordinary" life and ordinary action is a dangerous one from some points of view: if there is no sure distinction, or if members of a social body cannot agree on it, all actions become potentially playful or theatrical, and may signify plurally, removing the legibility of both play and its opposite. Theater, too, has long contended with with potential threat: if audiences or a general public cannot know what is theater and what is "for real," or mistakes one for the other, they risk just that sort of misreading, and the considerable consequences that might follow. It is this sort of conundrum that lead J.L Austin to exclude the theater from his study of performative speech, as I noted briefly in the first chapter; Austin was

largely uninterested in discussing playful or “insincere” use of speech acts, considering both jokes and the theatre to be something of an “etiolation” of language, “*parasitic* upon its normal use” (22, emphasis in original).<sup>39</sup> W. B. Worthen describes “theatrical utterance” as “part of a special class of infelicitous utterance in which the motives of the agent (‘persons having certain thoughts or feelings’ [Austin] 15) are either insincere or are not directly embodied in subsequent conduct,” ensconced in behavior which sounds a great deal like *play* (4). ARGs might frustrate language’s proper use in much the same way theater does, in Austin’s view, as its context and intention become muddy and indistinct. (In passing, one wonders what Austin would have made of reality TV, a para-theatrical situation that both is and is not theater, in which utterances seem both to be and not be actual.)

Both the proscenium and Huizinga’s magic circle, then, function as frames that specify vocabularies and delineate social rules for the actions that occur inside them. They also function as lenses through which those actions are properly viewed, ensuring (or attempting to) that those actions retain the appropriate meta-communication: this is theater, this is a game. Examples of the failure of this kind of framing include Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* broadcast, in which some listeners mistook a radio play about alien invasion to be an actual news story, or Ronald Reagan’s famous on-air “joke” about deploying nuclear weapons, which lost legibility as a jest (however ill-conceived) for some listeners when it was relayed out of context. One might also

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<sup>39</sup> Though I am no Austin scholar, the only specific reference I can find in his masterwork to games is his mention, during a discussion of the conventions and conventional procedures which lend appropriate meaning and weight to actions, that “with many procedures, for example playing games, however appropriate the circumstances I may still not be playing” (29-30). Here, Austin himself alludes to the impossibility of knowing, at any given moment, no matter how accepted the game procedure is, whether someone is actually playing--a matter central to games that “pervade” past the usual boundaries, but suggested here as a concern for *all* games, no matter how traditionally bounded.

recall my first apprehension of *The Hills*, which was such a mish-mash of genres and signals that I could not “read” what sort of television it was, whether the performers were actors, or whether the proposal I was witnessing was genuine (or in Austinian terms, felicitous). Not incidentally, in each of these examples the performance or behavior at stake--although I do not intend them as perfect cognates; their contexts definitely differ in important ways--is *mediatized*, emphasizing the potential for mediation to obscure or confuse the frame of content. Henry Jenkins alludes to this slippage of frames when he writes about the mobility of images and other assets within convergence culture (in his book of the same name); when media is nimble and iterable--massively transplantable and transportable--its connection to its original context is loose at best and eminently fallible.

The influence or presence of media is not, of course, necessary for contextual misunderstanding. Neither is theatricality, but theatricality can also abet this kind of confusion: the represented for the real, the mischievous for the sincere, or vice versa (as is partially explored in the mimicry dilemma discussed in the first chapter). Thomas de Zengotita provides an illuminating anecdote about this kind of theatrical confusion when he describes hearing of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination while in a Manhattan acting school dance studio while waiting for class to begin.

About thirty would-be actors and actresses were milling around the room in leotards, stretching, contemplating their mirror images . . . The studio door opened and, instead of the instructor, there appeared the assistant to the director of the school. She looked around, hesitating, groping for words, and finally just said, “President Kennedy has been shot. We don’t know yet how serious it is.” And then she left. There was some stirring and murmuring for a minute or so, a couple of people followed her out, and then someone, I couldn’t tell who, said “It’s an improv” (Kindle Locations 87-90).

De Zengotita describes the acting students as studiously applying their learned techniques for tragic acting: “A couple of girls were crumpled to the floor, fallen to their knees, doing the helpless palms turned upward thing, keening like Electra over the corpse of Agamemnon” (Kindle Location 104). When the truth emerged--that the news was legitimate--it probably comes as no surprise that “the embarrassment was excruciating” (Kindle Location 112). This humiliation is--not unlike the “ontological queasiness” referenced by Ridout and Barish--a physical manifestation of the discomfort brought about by misplacing the boundary of a *theatrical* magic circle. (Despite Stanislavski’s claim that actors must engage in “real experiencing,” there is still some difference, for these students, between *actual* circumstance and the ways in which the realism they study requires fictional circumstances to be *made* “real.”) For the students, the news of Kennedy’s death is received either as a national tragedy or a theatrical circumstance to be exploited, depending on their apprehension of the contextual framing surrounding the transmission of the news. For those who choose wrongly (apparently, in De Zengotita’s story, the bulk of the class), the mismatch between content and lens is, once revealed, as much an uncomfortable reminder of the contingency of meaning as it is of their own failure at distinguishing contextual clues.

However, failure to successfully distinguish theater or play from more serious behavior can have stronger consequences than embarrassment. Not knowing when something is theater is, at least, disconcerting; not knowing when theater might erupt can also, as Samuel Weber contends, cause disorder on a larger scale, taking particular advantage of theater’s potential to “[disturb] and [transform] the established order, traditional authority, and the hierarchies it entails” (35). Weber describes how the multiple, itinerant choirs described by the Athenian in

Plato's *Laws* appear at a public function and "drown the solemn ceremony with sheer blasphemy," a set of actions that not only disrupts "the unity of the theatron," but which concomitantly, Weber argues, vitally disrupts social organization--in his words, "*theory*, which is to say, of the ability of knowledge and competence to localize things, keep them in their proper place and thus contribute to social stability" (36). He suggests that theatrical performance that escapes the boundary of the proscenium or theater not only creates confusion, but that the potential for misreadings and infelicities that results may call the very foundations of a social body--knowledge itself,<sup>40</sup> or at least its utility--into question.

This potential can also inhere in games which display the sort of "unpredictable heterogeneity" Weber ascribes to those itinerant choirs who escape and exceed the theatron. Like the mixed reality sites of intermedial theater or reality television, pervasive games constitute a generic challenge to the boundaries of Huizinga's magic circle. These games (also known, with varying distinctions, as urban games, ubiquitous games, locative games or "big" games) disregard, in different ways and to different degrees, the environmental and temporal boundaries that more traditional games respect, often making use of social media, locative technologies, and media convergence to extend their reach into players' lives and to connect players to one another. However, while contemporary pervasive games are often associated with mobile, locative and social media, the category pre-dates the development of those technologies and does not require their use. In their excellent text on pervasive gaming, Annika Waern,

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<sup>40</sup> Though perhaps a seemingly petty stake in comparison to the "social stability" Weber cites, interfering with "the ability of knowledge . . . to localize things, keep them in their proper place" would also radically destabilize the practice of realism, which Elin Diamond calls "a theater of knowledge," a mode of production that both "urge[s] and satisfie[s] the pursuit of knowledge, the production of truth" (*Unmaking* xiii, 5).

Markus Montola and Jaako Stenros cite *Assassin*, or *Killer*, a relatively low-tech game common on college campuses, as a case study that makes evident some of the special, magic-circle-breaking qualities of pervasive games:

The referees assign one player to be your target, someone who you, an assassin, must kill and remove from the game using toy weapons. You are given some basic information about the target and his habits--maybe a photo, name and a home address. Using an arsenal including water guns, plastic knives, vinegar (poison), and alarm clocks (time bombs), you are supposed to stage a successful assassination. Depending on the rules, various means may be acceptable; maybe you could call his girlfriend and ask how to find your target. When you score a kill, the referees assign you a new mark; typically you get to kill your victim's target. The last man standing wins, or sometimes the player who scored the most kills. (3)

Montola and Stenros acknowledge the many variants of *Assassin* (they call the game *Killer*, but I use the name with which the game was first introduced to me), as well as its longevity; they point to J.W. Johnson's attribution of the game's origins to Robert Sheckley's 1953 short story "The Seventh Victim" and, possibly more significantly, "the Italian cult film [*La decima vittima*] based on the story," a speculative story about a dystopian future in which humans hunt each other, taking roles as both hunters and prey (3). In an effort to leverage the game mechanic for the purposes of "unlocking the kindness of strangers into a game" intended to foster feelings of happiness, Jane McGonigal and Ian Bogost created a version of *Assassin* in 2006 called *Cruel 2 B Kind*, in which players "killed" their targets with kindness (*Broken Kindle* Location 3156). In *C2BK*, players used "random acts of kindness" to eliminate other players with compliments, smiles, words of thanks or offers of help. McGonigal and Bogost's version emphasizes that while rhetorics of violence may be common in pervasive in games, as they are in gaming generally, they are not fundamental to the genre. Even traditional games of *Assassin* make use only of the indices of killing and violence, without requiring the simulation of violence or injury:

bananas or squirt guns stand in for pistols, vinegar for poison, disposable plastic cutlery for knives, etc.

*Assassin's* structure dictates that, though the rules may isolate certain specific times, practices or places as "out of bounds," the environment in which *Assassin* is played is the player's quotidian environment: a player eating breakfast, walking to classes, or studying in the library knows that "danger" may lurk at any corner: "Where you go during the weeks of the scenario [game], you are a legitimate target and all possible paranoia is justified" (5). Montola and Stenros also note that while play is representative, "Whatever you want to do in *Killer*, you have to do it for real. If you want to carry a fake weapon around the clock to protect yourself against an assault, you have to do it for real. You get to add sneaking, stalking and watching your back to your everyday life" (5). The game makes use of players' actual environments as a setting, uses actual identificatory information, and can interrupt or influence any number of "real world" activities that occur during the run of the game. Montola and Stenros note that a taxi cab ride taken in service of making a "kill" in *Assassin* is very much a "real" cab ride, paid for with "real" money (19).

### ***Alternatives to the magic circle.***

In the face of pervasive gaming practices that Huizinga's magic circle cannot adequately contain, some game scholars have attempted to present reliable criteria for determining the presence of game action. If games cannot be quarantined within a reliable, recognizable "magic circle," how can we know when, where, and if they are being played? In a sense, this question asks how we can be sure we are correctly reading the frames and meta-communications that

signal “gameness” or theatricality. Increasingly, though, the question may more pointedly ask how we are to make the distinction when those signals, that frame, is effaced--as in *Assassin* play, in which players (at least savvy ones) work stealthily and attempt to efface signs of their participation in the game until the moment of the attempted “kill.”

Contemporary game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman make use of the magic circle trope, but in more metaphorical terms, suggesting it as a kind of “shorthand” for the idea that game space and time is marked as different, out of the ordinary, without implying a permanent or wholly stable border (95). Some theorists, including Edward Castronova, have suggested that this magic circle is better imagined as a kind of “porous membrane” that somehow signals a space and time apart while remaining permeable. Writing specifically of video and computer games (like *Everquest* or *World of Warcraft*) that involve immersive on-line “worlds” rather than of pervasive games specifically, Castronova argues that “The membrane between synthetic worlds and daily life is definitely there but also definitely porous,” and that this allows users to negotiate their own relationships with the worlds--their level and nature of engagement: “What we have is an almost-magic circle, which seems to have the objective of retaining all that is good about the fantasy atmosphere of the synthetic world, while giving users the maximum amount of freedom to manipulate their involvement with them” (159-60). Other scholars suggest that we may have to rethink the idea of enacted fantasy as existing on the other side of a membrane, however porous, as games--not only pervasive games, but video games and low-investment casual games (like solitaire, electronic or not, or drop-in/drop-out games often played on personal devices, like *Words With Friends* or *Angry Birds*), which are more and more ubiquitous as the platforms on which they may be played multiply and become more portable



and widely accessible--increasingly mix with “real life.” Mia Consalvo argues, “While it may be helpful to consider that there is an invisible boundary marking game space from normal space, that line has already been breached, if it was ever there to start with (qtd in Perron and Arsenault 111). Consalvo considers such a boundary a questionable concept not only because of the pervasive nature of gameplay in certain contemporary games, but because game activity (she writes below mainly of video and computer games) may “pervade” past orthodox play trajectories into related, perhaps even subversive activities: “[W]ith the development of entire genres of games . . . that are played across time and space, and player interest in games that extend beyond the simple playing of a game to activities such as creating walkthroughs of games, writing fan fiction, or developing character skins for particular games, can we always say that play involves a special time and place?” (Consalvo 7).

***Intent, legibility and mistaken mischief.***

If not a special time and place, then--or if that “special” boundary is so porous, so permeable, that it cannot be satisfactorily relied upon--how does one confront the important question posed at this chapter’s beginning: how can we know when, where, and if games are being played? One consideration is the orientation of the actor or agent towards an action or situation: Bernard Perron and Dominic Arsenault have suggested that “Playing a game always requires the understanding and voluntary adoption of certain behaviors enforced through the game’s rules. . . . We cannot play if we are not conscious of playing” (111).<sup>41</sup> Perron and

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<sup>41</sup> Perron and Arsenault take as specific their object of study, in the cited piece, primarily about video and computer games, but do not explicitly limit their argument to video games alone as they write about theories of play applicable to a wider field of play experience.

Arsenault turn to Gregory Bateson's theory of play, noting that his observations of both human and animal play lead him to deduce that

“this phenomenon, play, could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of metacommunication, that is of exchanging signals which would carry the message ‘This is play’ . . . Expanded, the statement ‘This is play’ looks something like this: ‘These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote” (emphasis in original, qtd in Perron and Arsenault 112).

Perron and Arsenault argue that picking up a game controller is an incontrovertible signal that a gamer is about to engage in a playful activity, rather than, for example, interacting with “the real world” using the same computer on which she plays *Gears of War*. The failure to give or read the signal carrying the “this is play” message, they argue, “would be a huge problem and probably necessitate therapy” (112). Here, the potential for confusion regarding the reality of the situation--is it a game, or is it not?--is figured in terms of psychological rather than physical unease, as in Barish's queasiness and De Zengotita's “excruciating” embarrassment.

In trying to apply Perron and Arsenault's argument about the play of video games to more pervasive games, it becomes immediately clear that for many pervasive games, there is no cognate to “picking up a game controller.” In such games, game activity looks a lot like ordinary life activity; in fact, the two may often coincide. Someone playing *Assassin* is, in the strictest sense, playing at all times--unless his or her particular instantiation of the game has established rules to the contrary--even if he or she is sleeping, or forgets to be vigilantly aware of the game in a moment of laxity. The actions involved in eating breakfast, for a player of *Assassin*, are not game actions per se, but they may occur within the game; a given breakfast-eater *could but must not necessarily be* playing *Assassin* at the same time.

It is also apparent that meta-communication may not be as successful a criterion for establishing the presence of play or of “game” when it comes to pervasive gaming, specifically because part of the game, one of its rules or even its overall aesthetic, may be a refusal to engage in meta-communication that identifies you as playing. *Assassin*, again, can serve as an example: while a player may at times admit to be playing (especially if she scores a hit and advances within the game), a great deal of gameplay typically involves masking any meta-communication of the game state: pretending that you are not playing *anything* may be necessary in order to play *Assassin* well, and is often part of the undercurrent of excitement the game can bring to “ordinary,” quotidian actions. This sort of invisible, or illegible, playfulness has actually led to misfires as concerns *Assassin* play. In 2008, campus police apprehended a University of Nebraska student suspected of carrying a weapon to class; the “weapon” in question was a Nerf gun that shot foam “darts,” which the student was carrying as part of *Assassin* play. The school’s vice-chancellor for student affairs announced a ban on the game, writing that it “is extremely inappropriate in this day and age in which we are all too familiar with the [recent] Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University shootings” (USA Today). In 2009, a man inadvertently caused a bomb scare by placing a box, emitting chirping sounds and labeled, “Bomb--you’re dead” in a Costco store in Fife, Washington (*Seattle Times*). Mental illness, it would seem, is not a necessary pre-cursor to misidentifying the meta-communications associated with pervasive game play.

It also seems clear that giving out and receiving the meta-communication that Bateson describes must be an uncertain enterprise even if players attempt to do so unambiguously: while it can be surprisingly easy to communicate that you’re playing a game, the cues that do so are culturally specific and subject to any manner of misinterpretation (the University of Nebraska

student in the above illustration, for instance, most likely never suspected that bringing a Nerf gun to class might be misunderstood as an aggressive act). In the essay “Unwritten Rules,” Stephen Sniderman writes of a group of scientists teaching dolphins to play water polo, in which the dolphins seem to get pleasure out of placing the ball in the goal, or at least are eager to do it; their behavior is legible to the observing scientists as “playfulness.” When it comes to defense, however, the dolphins become ruthless: “When the trainers tried to get them to stop the other team from ‘scoring,’ the dolphins launched an all-out war on the other team’s players, using methods that no person steeped in the concepts of sportspeopleship [sic] would ever use” (487). The dolphins’ behavior might be interpreted as a failure of literacy, of one group to read the meta-communication of another, but it is difficult to imagine any case in which people could expect to interpret the behavior of dolphins unerringly. What appears to be a lack of playfulness on the dolphins’ part (when it comes to defense, at least) might be a misunderstanding; perhaps the scientists were simply bad teachers, or perhaps there is no useful cognate in dolphin behavior for sportsmanship.

***Oscillation, “shuttlings and spinnings.”***

For people as for dolphins, it appears that trying to define and contain games--which is what it seems to me is what is at stake when we work so hard in attempts to establish their limits, essential qualities and the signals that communicate their presence--is as difficult as trying to define or contain performance. Given this, the figure of the magic circle may seem unsatisfactory, at least in the state in which Huizinga first offers it: he seems certain that it is a stark and essential divide, one that, as previously cited, “even a child” can discern: “play is not

‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own” (8). The posited stubbornness of this distinction has prompted the many attempts at revision of Huizinga’s best known figure; in the face of games that appear less discernible, the tenacity with which he promotes this clear ontological difference can make the “magic circle” an easy target.

However, McGonigal has pointed out that later in *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga appears to undercut this: “The contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid,” he writes. “Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play” (8). What utility does Huizinga’s circle present if this contrast is so fluid? Are these ontologies stable and fixed, or fluid and collapsible? I believe one answer suggested by Huizinga, albeit obliquely, is that the ontologies are *not* fluid per se, but that the switch from one to another can happen with surprising agility, one that can mask a difference he considers essential by making oscillation between distinct states appear to be a liminal space between. He alludes to this in a particularly revelatory citation from *Homo Ludens* that McGonigal uses to great effect:

Huizinga never suggests that finding the boundary between play and seriousness will be an easy task. He describes attempted classification as a dizzying experience: “We are seized with vertigo at the ceaseless shuttlings and spinings in our mind of the thought: What is play? What is serious?” (214) [*Might Be* 492]

McGonigal suggests Huizinga’s drive to classify, to assign ontologies in a “binomial nomenclature,” is a rhetorical strategy as much as, or *more* than, a interest in rigidly defining play and seriousness as mutually exclusive (487). Huizinga actually emphasizes the difficulty of negotiating between the two by observing that, while seriousness is defined by the absence of play, play is not similarly defined by the absence of seriousness or earnestness. Play can

certainly be earnest or serious, especially when the stakes are high, and play can also involve *playing* at earnestness. Both/either earnest play and/or mischievous “playing serious” might be observed in reality television shows like the ones discussed in the last chapter (although, as the chapter contends, the project of effectively and accurately identifying seriousness or sincerity is complex, if not impossible), or in Scott Shepherd’s mimicry of Burton, which is certainly mischievous even as its technical mastery connotes a serious and studied effort. The resemblance between that which is serious and that which plays at seriousness--two states, I emphasize, which Huizinga sees as fundamentally separate, if sometimes disturbingly similar-looking--can be particularly confounding.

In fact, the distinction seems so impenetrable by rational analysis that McGonigal reads Huizinga as suggesting that the classification “is as much a *visceral* enterprise as a rational one. The proper categories for acting in play or in earnest must be felt, rather than reasoned” (*Might Be* 494, emphasis in original). For all Huizinga’s interest in classification, he ends up describing a radically fallible system of distinguishing between quantities that are both opposites and may occasionally include one another (in the case of play that adopts a pretense of seriousness in a strategic masquerade or mischievous presentation). In the absence of a more satisfactory criterion for judgment, this is what those who would differentiate games from serious endeavor are left with: recourse to their *kishkes*; a clearly subjective and contingent gut-check--one that recalls the arbitration, discussed in the first chapter, of teacher-gurus of psychorealism like Sanford Meisner and Lee Strasberg, both of whom considered themselves, not their student actors, as the final authority when it came to discerning whether or not an actor’s work was “honest” or some sort of “dishonest” manufacture. I should emphasize that the assigning of certain authority to *some* privileged observers, as in Meisner’s and Strasberg’s classrooms is a

flawed means of discernment that Huizinga nowhere endorses; the viscera, for Huizinga, seem rather universally qualified (although, troublingly, social or cultural difference seems not to be accounted for in their assessments).

*Ambiguity and the threat of a “demented world.”*

If attempts to answer the question “is it play, or is it serious?”--rather like the hackneyed “is reality TV real?” or an attempt to fully distinguish between Burton and Shepherd during their deeply imbricated but differently generated performances--is ultimately unsatisfying, the question at least suggests two things: first, that an inability to distinguish between the two states or modes consistently and satisfactorily--the fact that we have to rely on feeling--constrains the asker from operating as if they were meaningfully separate. And second, that the prevalence and persistence of the question throughout the study of playful behavior, including acting and make-believe, highlight its the high stakes involved in attempting answering it, in behaving as if it *can* be answered. Like the question I dismissed in the previous chapter about reality television--“Is it/when is it/how much of it is real?”--demanding to know whether (or to what degree, or in what register) we are playing is a reduction of much more complex concerns, and yet the high stakes involved in attempting to answer reflect the serious anxieties--or, figured more positively, the curiosity--of the asker.

The “visceral enterprise” upon which one must depend to distinguish seriousness from play which may be leveraging seriousness may have had particular urgency for Huizinga, whose interest in classifying and separating seriousness and play coincided with a rapidly proliferating fascism he characterized, in an earlier book, as “social forces gone wild with power.”

McGonigal suggests Huizinga’s preoccupation with discerning seriousness from play as a

response to Nazi and Fascist powers “hijack[ing]” the “agonistic impulse that Huizinga defines as the driving force of play” in the machinations of World War II. She deftly comments on the historical context in which *Homo Ludens* was produced, noting that three years prior to its initial German-language publication, Huizinga warned of a breakdown not unlike the one Weber describes as the result of the itinerant choruses, a urgent and precarious situation in which social structure itself is at risk:

We are living in a demented world. And we know it . . . . Everywhere there are doubts as to the solidity of our social structure, vague fears of the imminent future, a feeling that our civilization is on the way to ruin. They are not merely the shapeless anxieties, which beset us in the small hours of the night when the flame of life burns low. They are considered expectations founded on observation and judgment of an overwhelming multitude of facts. How to avoid the recognition that almost all things which once seemed sacred and immutable have now become unsettled, truth and humanity, justice and reason? We see forms of government no longer capable of functioning, production systems on the verge of collapse, social forces gone wild with power. The roaring engine of this tremendous time seems to be heading for a breakdown (12). [qtd in McGonigal, *Might Be* 506]

Preoccupation with classification might gain new importance in a time of “shapeless anxieties” and the displacement and dismantling of previously “sacred and immutable” “recognition[s].” In the conclusion of *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga suggests that the work of discerning serious intention depends on a morality he seems to see, in western Europe’s 1938, as both gravely necessary and precarious: “[I]f we have to decide whether an action to which our will impels us is a serious duty or is licit as play, our moral conscience will at once provide the touchstone. As soon as truth and justice, compassion and forgiveness have part in our resolve to act, our anxious question loses all meaning” (213). Whether or not the presence of moral compunction or compassion totally evacuates the importance of the question--and certainly without suggesting acts of war or oppression might be easily legible as play--Huizinga here recognizes the importance of context for evaluating the seriousness of action(s), as well as the potentially heavy



consequences of those judgments. As McGonigal has it, “For Huizinga, play is not just a historical factor in culture; it is also a continuing ethical issue, one that is most clearly articulated by the difficulty in classification it poses” (*Might Be* 495). In fact, Huizinga’s death after long detention at the hands of Nazi forces occupying the Netherlands might be read as sobering evidence of the political stakes involved in determining the seriousness, and so inferring the likely consequence, of the actions of both individuals and the groups they comprise.

***Alternate reality games: playing for real.***

Pervasive games willfully trouble the idea of a stable magic circle (even considering Huizinga’s own complex view of the circle, which is more nuanced than might appear at first glance), complicating distinctions between gameplay and its various others: for Huizinga, the other of play is “seriousness,” but I might also suggest sincerity, ordinariness, or even, in a twist on Thomas De Zengotita’s claim (that within a hypermediatized culture the opposite of “real” is “optional”), something like compulsoriness: in a sense, the opposite of play is that which is mandatory, essential, or enforced. However, the very plurality of these “others” suggest that play, so difficult to adequately define or contain, cannot be absolutely opposed to any of them, and is likely unable to fully *exclude* any of them, either. De Zengotita’s proffered opposite, for example--“real”--is unsatisfactory because play *is* real, is actual, much in the same way theater is, although, like theater, it is also at least intermittently infelicitous, and can easily be other than it seems. Since all of these “various others” fail to offer a totalizing opposite to play, it remains difficult not only to delineate, adequately, where and when (and to/with whom) play might be happening, but how a useful *alternative* to play might be defined or constituted.

Similarly, this difficulty is not by-product, but the purposeful hallmark of an even more specific genre of pervasive gaming: alternate reality games, which pair pervasiveness with a game scenario that *plays at seriousness*--which, in fact, takes as a fundamental aspect of play a refusal to acknowledge the game as a game. This refusal is not wholly unique to ARGs as they are understood in a contemporary moment; in his 2005 ARG handbook *This is Not A Game*, game designer Dave Szulborski devotes a chapter to “ARG Pre-History,” in an attempt to draw a genealogy that connects ARGs with earlier experiments in playing-at-seriousness. Some of what Szulborski includes in this brief “pre-history” are examples of works (often of literature) in which are in fact fictional but “pretend” not to be, or which present themselves as fictional but actually interact and coincide with the extra-diegetic world, as in the case of a children’s book called *Masquerade*. The book, by Kit Williams, contained illustrations which hid “messages that led to a real life treasure hunt” (76). *Masquerade* is notable for rehearsing the coincidence of fiction and actuality that ARGs were later to exploit: the book, its story, is fictional, but the messages refer to actual objects and phenomena--and the “treasure,” of course, was actually money and actually winnable.

While an exhaustive history of ARG pre-cursors is outside the scope of this chapter, Szulborski mentions two particular experiences that made use of early Internet technologies to attempt ARG-like games. Pink Floyd’s *Publius Enigma* began in 1994, when a user with the name Publius began leaving enigmatic messages on a Usenet newsgroup devoted to the band. The posts, which appeared while Pink Floyd was touring to support their *Division Bell* album, alluded to a mysterious “message” from the band, mentioned an “enigma” to be solved, and directed readers to “communicate with each other, as this is the only way the answers can be revealed” (qtd in Szulborski 87-88). An even earlier example, *Ong’s Hat: Incunabula*, is

described by Szulborski as “an interactive online mystery,” a label could also fit many ARGs, although it lacks emphasis on a specific alternate reality that co-exists with actuality. Szulborski writes that even today, a casual search on the internet results in manifold references to the “delightful legend of the Ong’s Hat travel cult,” which “has been posted in the form of the ‘Incunabula Papers’ since the earliest days of BBS and Internet communications.” He goes on to explain *Ong*’s relevance to the study of contemporary ARGs:

Dig a little deeper and you can find traces of online activity that, in retrospect, can only be considered the *in-game* telling of the story, throughout the 1990s, and real world evidence reaching back as far as 1988, when small pieces appeared in cyber-science fiction magazines . . . Xerox ‘zines’ and catalogs, mail-art networks, and photocopied newsletters. As [in] ARGs, the story was delivered through various media and methods and, at many points, required some form of action or interaction from the ‘player’ to proceed further into the mystery of the tale. The well-researched and intricately detailed plot, much too long and twisted to do justice to with a brief summary here, took years to unfold and represents, in my opinion, the first real attempt to create a believable and interactive fictional world using the tools of the Internet.

According to Szulborski, *Ong* “utiliz[ed] Xerox, BBS and later Internet technology, CD ROM technology and even traditional print publishing as its various mediums,” requiring players to piece together information from multiple platforms, and even requiring them to act cooperatively to solve problems and puzzles, both hallmarks of ARG play (83).

While Szulborski focuses on pre-digital efforts at reaching players via a multi-platform approach, in the way contemporary ARGs also do, *Ong* and *Publius* are also notable for their self-presentation--the “playing at seriousness” discussed earlier, which is a fundamental characteristic of contemporary ARGs. Though, as Szulborski demonstrates, this game-face pre-dates ARGs, The codification of this peculiar aesthetic of ARGs is usually attributed to the designers of *The A.I. Web Game*, the game commonly credited as the first ARG.

***The Beast.***

This game, commonly nicknamed *The Beast*, was revolutionary in that it established what became formal rules (or the closest thing to them in a genre that tends to eschew both formalities and rules) of the ARGs that followed it. Proposed as an innovative promotional effort for Steven Spielberg's film *Artificial Intelligence (A.I.)*, *The Beast* evolved, according to lead writer Sean Stewart, from a project assigned to Microsoft's Game Group to create, in his own words, "a virtual world to stand behind the new Spielberg movie . . . Spielberg and his producer, Kathy Kennedy, felt that A.I.'s themes made it only natural that it should expand not in sequels, but on the computer." The story set in this virtual world abutted the events of the film rather than continued or simulated them; the story of *The Beast* is, at least loosely, the story of the murder of Evan Chan, a character with only an ancillary relationship to the events and characters of the film; Szulborski calls it "an investigation into the backdrop of the A.I. story, the world of 2142," "exploring the various themes of artificial intelligence that ran through the movie" (94) .

According to Stewart, when he was tapped by Microsoft employee Jordan Weisman to collaborate on the game, Weisman had already "been thinking about doing a game that would be sort of like the Beatles Paul-Is-Dead mystery--an elaborate web of clues and possible conspiracies to be investigated by a huge group of fans." As Stewart tells it, "Jordan's vision was based on a series of assumptions," most of which have become canonical standards for ARG play:

1. **The narrative would be broken into fragments, which the players would be required to reassemble.** That is, the players, like the advanced robots at the end of the movie, would be doing something essentially archaeological, combing through the welter of life in the 22nd century, to piece a story together out of fragments.

2. **The game would--of necessity--be fundamentally cooperative and collective, because of the nature of the internet.** His belief, which we all shared, was that if we put a clue in a Turkish newspaper at dawn, it would be under discussion in a high school kids basement in Iowa by dinner time.

**3. The game would be cooler if nobody knew who was doing it, or why.**

Therefore, secrecy was very tight. Almost nobody at Microsoft would know what the hell we were doing. Jordan had brought in old pal Pete Fenlon to subcontract writers, artists, and web designers, for the sake of speed and staying under MS's own internal radar.

**4. The game would be cooler if it came at you, through as many different conduits as possible.** Websites. E-mails. Phone calls. Newspaper clippings. Faxes. SMS messaging. TV spots. Smoke signals. Whalesong.

In an earlier conversation, Jordan had been sitting around mulling the idea over with Elan Lee, when his phone rang. He glanced at Elan, grinning. "Wouldn't it be cool if that was the game calling?" (emphases in original)

The goal, according to Stewart, was not only a game that was “cool,” but that felt cooler because it felt more *real*--specifically, because the game would not respect boundaries (“a book you can close, a movie happens in a theater--but the Game should evade those boundaries”), because it involved a meticulously crafted fictional world integrated with the actual through real world objects--real phone calls, real websites, etc.--and because it would never admit its own fictionality.<sup>42</sup> Stewart credits the group’s commitment to Weisman’s starting points above with the evolution of the this-is-not-a-game aesthetic--even though some of these central tenets were implicit in the pre-ARGs discussed by Szulborski: *Ong’s Hat* used multiple platforms to reach players, and *Publius* explicitly directed fans to work together to solve (in fact, even to find) the enigma referenced in its initial post, pre-figuring a key design strategy of ARGs: hiding

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<sup>42</sup> A well-known fictional representation of a similar game is supplied by David Fincher’s 1997 movie *The Game*, starring Michael Douglas as a hardened executive whose priorities are re-arranged when he is plunged into an intricate parallel reality—The Game. This Game has no appreciable boundaries: it (and its agents) follows him home, calls him on the telephone, bumps into him on the street; because The Game isn’t contained within any one facet of the character’s life, it effectively touches everything he does. He can never be sure when he’s playing it; anyone he meets and any circumstance he encounters might be a part of The Game. Though the film doesn’t enter into Stewart’s story of the development of a game that aspired to a similar pervasiveness (even as he refers to it as “the Game,” invoking the film’s title), the similarities between what he describes and the 1997 film are notable.

“clues” within puzzles that require cooperative effort to solve. While the game mechanics if ARGs do not require the internet per se (see *Ong’s Hat*), they do rely on networked communication that allows cooperative play and the generation of collective intelligence.

A player might become aware of the game that was *The Beast* via two “rabbit holes,” or points of entry into the virtual world of the game: the first involved a credit listed in the film’s trailer for “Jeanine Salla, Sentient Machine Therapist”—a credit which looked just like the other, non-fictional credits for the film. A web search for that name and occupation provided a link to Bangalore World University, a fictional school represented by an in-game website that gave no outward clue as to its fictionality. In a news story prominently displayed on the site, a professor named Jeanine Salla was mentioned, and elsewhere on the site it was possible to find her phone number and email address. The phone number yielded a outgoing voice mail message which mentioned the recent, suspicious death of the (as yet unknown) game character Evan Chan. The second rabbit hole took the form of “notches” visible in the words “Summer 2001” in the same trailer, which were decoded by curious players/observers into a phone number. This phone number also yielded a recorded outgoing message, but a different one:

“Welcome, my child. Once upon a time there was a forest that teemed with life, love, sex and violence. Things that humans did naturally. And their robots copied—flawlessly. This forest is vast and surprising. It is full of grass, and trees, and databanks, and drowned apartment buildings, filled with fish. It can be a frightening forest, and some of its paths are dark and difficult. I was lost there once—a long time ago. Now I try to help others who have gone astray. If you ever feel lost, my child, write me at “thevisionary[dot]net”. And I will leave you a trail of crumbs.” (qtd in Szulborski 96)

Eventually, those who entered the game via this “rabbit hole” also heard mention of Evan Chan’s death, and from there worked through the massive web of “crumbs” and puzzles designed by

Weisman's team to intrigue and engage players, individually and cooperatively. Here, Stewart describes the scope of the project:

So there was the project: create an entire self-contained world on the web, say a thousand pages deep, and then tell a story through it, advancing the plot with weekly updates, concealing each new piece of narrative in such a way that it would take clever teamwork to dig it out. Create a vast array of assets--custom photos, movies, audio recordings, scripts, corporate blurbage, logos, graphic treatments, web sites, flash movies--and deploy them through a net of (untraceable) web sites, phone calls, fax systems, leaks, press releases, phony newspaper ads, and so on ad infinitum. (The first draft of Dan Carver's art asset sheet had 666 items. He dubbed it *The Beast*, and the Game's nickname was born.)

In ARGs like *The Beast*, the game and "ordinary" realities coincide in certain people, actions and objects. Szulborski explains this feature of ARG play to the uninitiated by noting that ARGs make use of "tools and methods that are already integrated parts of a player's everyday life":

The pieces or components of alternate reality games are websites, e-mail messages, videos, Internet blogs, phone calls, and even real world interactions. Thanks to ubiquitous computing<sup>43</sup> . . . the constructed elements that make up an ARG--primarily the Internet delivered [sic] content--have become such integrated parts of the gamer's everyday world that they no longer contain the *metacommunication* that defines them as part of a game" (emphasis in original, 13).

ARGs exploit the ubiquity (at least in certain, privileged environments) of technology and networked-ness, effectively rooting the games in the actuality of ubiquitous computing even as it

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<sup>43</sup> McGonigal, whose dissertation takes on the intersections between ubiquitous computing (or ubicomp) and play, offers this definition of the former: "the emerging field of computer science that seeks to augment everyday objects and physical environments with invisible and networked computing functionality" (*Might Be* 3). The notion of ubiquitous computing is opposed, for example, to the "desktop" model of computing, in which computational devices are specialized, easily recognized and locatable. The computational devices and systems which support ubiquitous computing, alternatively, may resemble non-computing objects, and may even engage users without their knowing they are engaging in human-computer interaction.

sketches the fantasy of an alternate reality.

***This is not a game.***

One of the ways ARGs achieve an “immersive” quality, then, is their deployment across multiple platforms in an effort to surround the user with references to a “secret” world or narrative rather than confine play to reserved time and place. In a sense, ARGs owe their immersive qualities to the games’ pervasiveness; the fact that ARGs do not respect the boundary of a magic circle is part of their generic refusal to announce themselves, at least explicitly, as games. As Szulborski notes in passing above, this effacement of the game-ness of the game is an important and constitutive move in ARGs: one of the most significant, identifiable hallmarks of ARG play is both the game’s (via the designer) and the player’s abstention from engaging in the metacommunication Bateson suggests signals play. This attribute, instrumental in both ARG’s immersiveness and their pervasiveness, is commonly referred to as TING or TINAG, or **this is not (a) game** (McGongial *Real 1*). The idea of TINAG, and the use of those specific words to describe it, is associated specifically with ARG play, but a similar effacement might also be seen in some pervasive games like *Assassin*, in which players often must disguise the fact of their engagement with the game to achieve the game’s goal--after all, it is more likely that a stealthy assassin, one not calling attention to the doubleness of her actions as she stalks her target through the minutiae of his daily routine, will be effective. A version of TINAG is also evident in urban play experiences like Improv Everywhere’s annual No Pants Subway Ride, which calls on participating “agents” not to acknowledge that the experience in which they’re engaged (or



simply their lack of pants) is a planned and unusual event.<sup>44</sup> Because the bulk of the action in ARGs does not involve specialized actions that immediately announce the presence of a game, like rolling dice or picking up a specialized controller, but rather is composed of actions commonplace in players' everyday lives (like checking email, receiving text messages or posting to an internet discussion board), it is possible for gameplay to resemble out-of-game actions in a way that supports the TINAG aesthetic. Similarly, because the games make use of objects with "real" utility, like posters for actual Hollywood blockbusters, or web sites (which may be associated with fictional game elements but which never admit their fictionality) that are publicly accessible and as "real" in their virtual web presence as sites for Microsoft or Starbucks, there is no single, clear signal that distinguishes playful acts from "normal" or more sincere ones.

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<sup>44</sup> The No Pants Subway Ride is an annual event in multiple United States cities; when I participated in Los Angeles in 2009, I was instructed to answer questions about my state of undress with, "What do you mean?" "I forgot!" or some generalized statement of incomprehension or surprise rather than an acknowledgement of the performance event.

Szulborski uses Friedrich Kittler's maxim "there is no software"<sup>45</sup> to describe ARG play: from a player's perspective, at least ideally, there are no inner workings made explicit, only interfaces made available--and the interfaces appear to be the same, or of the same type, as interfaces ubiquitous to the daily experience of gamers. However, in practice, ARGs rarely live up to this claim. In order for the game to be locatable enough to play, game elements must have some weirdness, some oddity that calls attention to themselves--in *The Beast*, the profession of the character Jeannine Salla ("Sentient Machine Therapist") is clearly fictional, and an enterprising gamer would not have to work very hard to disprove the existence of any actual "Bangalore World University." The tone and language of the outgoing message that welcomed players--"my child," "once upon a time,"--also contains signals that suggest content as fictional, even playful. The pleasurable creepiness of ARGs is tied to their refusal to acknowledge their own fictionality, but to recognize this is not to assert that the assets that comprise the fictional words of ARGs are indistinguishable from websites, emails, even face to face encounters that are

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<sup>45</sup> Szulborski takes from Kittler the observation that the "so-called philosophy of the computer community tends to systematically obscure hardware by software, electronic signifiers by interfaces between formal and everyday languages," to the extent that graphical user interfaces and the like "hide a whole machine from its users." When effacement is so complete, the figural invisibility of hardware allows software to appear primary, and therefore not so "soft." Further, he points out, "soft"ware exists at a "microscopic level of hardware itself," as in "so-called protection software: which prevents "'untrusted programs' or 'untrusted users' from any access" to certain vital functions. To risk reduction, Szulborski's alludes to Kittler in order to imply that in ARG play, as in computing, the interface is so opaque and so integrated with the hidden "core" of the enterprise itself that it cannot actually be the soft, external, *separable* layer it pretends to be. Similarly, Szulborski suggests that the ideal form of ARG play would involve an interface or "curtain" that is so dense and impermeable (and therefore so proscriptive) as to obscure any and all inner workings, leaving visible to users only the putative surface--which, since it is designed to function as if it does not hide anything, appears not as an interface but the thing itself. Whether or not this is actually true of ARGs in practice is debatable; the genre may have been conceived as depending on this kind of inviolable firewall between user and designer, but, as this chapter will explore, many games involve dynamic exchange between the two parties that belie this notion. Later in this section, I will argue ARGs are properly viewed less as this kind of perfect theatre and more like self-conscious masquerades.

*not* part of the game--that is, real-world interactions, real-world websites, etc. Rather than suggesting ARGs as necessarily successful simulations, it seems apt to argue for them as extravagant masquerades that are often visible as such and may never succeed at effacing their own construction, but which are still marked by their unwillingness to show their strings and seams--the strange performance that the desire to abjure the frame of performance ends up requiring. The “alternate reality” of alternate reality games is not unlike the reality of reality show television: it has some novel commerce with the actual, but is never succeeds in fully masking its own construction (and arguably never takes this kind of total obscurity as a serious goal, Szulborski’s assertion about the lack of “software” to the contrary). Just as reality television shows often harness a televisual vocabulary of liveness, as discussed in the last chapter, in order to grant their pledge of “realness” some weight, ARGs may go to some length to present themselves as an alternate reality rather than a fictional one; but just as reality TV doesn’t actually enjoy docile, naive viewers who take its constructions as the naturally occurring “reality” it sometimes announces itself to be, ARGs players do not--for a million tiny reasons--run the risk of actually confusing the game with reality.

***Theorizing immersion: modes and methods.***

In other words, TINAG is a fundamentally theatrical aesthetic: a tacit agreement by players and designers to disregard the “gameness” of ARGs during play (if not design), to safeguard the highly constructed fiction from announcing itself, to willingly suspend their disbelief. This endeavor is abetted by the fact that the narrative they draw, one that is mainly authored by designers but pieced together and often affected by players, ostensibly insists on the

“true” existence of the described alternate reality. The games’ hallmark “this is not a game” aesthetic preserves the make-believe that the game’s narrative describes actual circumstances and events rather than fictional ones. In this lies an important difference between games described as pervasive, like *Assassin*, and ARGs, which are usually described not only as pervasive, but *immersive*: they grant access to a compellingly drawn fictional reality that manages, through its employment of embedded technologies and practices that already engage the player in a variety of circumstances and environments, to surround her (not flawlessly, not in a perfect representation of a virtual world, but with exciting, unpredictable “finds”) with game references. While playing *Assassin* may involve a certain amount of make-believe, it does not provide, in its gaming scenario, a richly constructed narrative centered around an alternate reality.

Despite the certain impossibility of something like total “immersion” in a perfectly rendered, constantly present game reality/world/scenario, ARG play is often characterized as *immersive gaming*. The term is contested, in part because immersion, especially according to the definitions offered by early writers on game play and virtual experience, suggests a totalizing substitution of realities, usually delivered through a media-enabled simulation. In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, written in 1998, Janet Murray refers to immersion as a “psychological” phenomenon: “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus” (98). Murray’s definition reads as somewhat dated now; even though she refers to immersion as a “psychological” phenomenon, she describes it in sensory terms, a move that brings to mind the fantasies of VR helmets and other devices we might have once imagined would deliver us into virtual realities through sensory and haptic interfaces. (It also brings to mind, in passing, Huizinga’s “visceral”

enterprise in discerning play and seriousness, also an apparent sensory experience.) Although elsewhere she characterizes the imagery of immersion as “metaphorical,” “derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water,” even in its illustrative capacity it refers to a phenomenon notable for its totality. One cannot be *partially* submerged, in this figuring; immersion is an all or nothing proposition.

Game designers Salen and Zimmerman reference both the sensory and totalizing implications of the notion of immersion when they describe an “immersive fallacy”:

the idea that the pleasure of media experience lies in its ability to *sensually* transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality. According to the immersive fallacy, this reality is so complete that ideally the frame falls away so that the player truly believes that he or she is part of an imaginary world (emphasis mine, 450-1).

Salen and Zimmerman respond, in this articulation, specifically to a definition of immersion offered by game designer Francois Dominic Laramée, one that uses Coleridge’s “suspension of disbelief” (Laramée, perhaps tellingly, drops the “willing”) to describe a state in which “the player’s mind forgets that it is being subjected to an entertainment and instead accepts what it perceives as reality” (qtd in Salen and Zimmerman, 450).

Setting aside, for the moment, a critique of Laramée’s definition (which seems to ignore any contingency reality might possess--the extent to which it is always, game or not, the product of subjective perception), the immersion described by him, and by Murray, does seem to present a nearly impossible standard, at least as concerns game design. These definitions require not the mischievous blurring of boundaries that pervasive games achieve, but an unlikely substitution of realities specifically spurred by a falsified sensory awareness produced by mediatization; short of something like a fictional Star Trek holodeck, it is difficult to imagine an engagement with game

reality that completely supersedes and replaces awareness and participation in the more ordinary reality that produced the game itself. Theorists like Murray may not only have exaggerated but misapprehended the sensation involved in immersion, at least as it is currently realized. The recognition--a sort of subjective perception not dissimilar to the one demanded by Huizinga's attempt to distinguish between play and seriousness--of an illusion sufficiently comprehensive and flawless as to pass as reality probably involves a simultaneous recognition that the experience or perception in question *requires* that kind of judgment, which is to say: immersive scenarios invites judgment of its realness in a way that "plain" reality would not, and so tips its hand even in its virtuosity.

Not all definitions of immersive experience, though, involve digital or media-enabled simulations, or require such totalizing effect. In his 2003 text *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Oliver Grau places twenty-first century ideas of virtual reality into the context of earlier immersive art techniques, constructing "a prehistory of the immersive procedures of computer virtual reality" (5). He traces a detailed history of both virtuality and the immersion it was often considered to potentiate that includes the painting of "immersive" panoramas in the early nineteenth century and early cinematic applications like stereoscope and Sensorama. Considering immersion as a potential priority or effect of visual art, he describes it not as a wholesale "submersion," in Murray's terms, but as a "feeling . . . of presence (an impression suggestive of 'being there'), which can be enhanced further through interaction with apparently 'living' environments in 'real time'" (6). In *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Marie-Laure Ryan suggests immersive potential is not reserved for visual representations, but may exist in other renderings of fictional

worlds, including those presented through narrative. Though she cautions that using the term indiscriminately to refer to any “intensely pleasurable” or “absorbing activity” would render a crossword puzzle immersive in the same manner as a novel, she offers a more exacting definition that precludes this conflation: “immersion is the experience through which a fictional world acquires the presence of an autonomous, language-independent reality populated with live human beings” (14). Ryan’s definition pointedly does not require digital or visual media. Additionally, she notes the radical contingency of “immersive ideals” which shift according to changing epistemologies and fashions (although Ryan confines her analysis largely to “the history of Western art”), rather than suggesting an inexorable, teleological progression toward a unified goal of more and more exacting approximations of (normative perceptions of) reality (2).

In a particularly helpful insight, Anne Friedberg writes of the need to “disentangle” the virtualizing effects of media from the rhetoric of immersion. That which is “immersive,” she writes, is implicitly and significantly unframed, rather like ARGs pretend to be through their TINAG aesthetic: the imaginary of “virtual reality” differs from “framed delivery system(s) for virtual images” that cinema and television have previously provided most importantly in its posited framelessness (11). I do not mean to elide this chapter’s description of the alternate realities made available through ARGs with the specific concerns of Grau, Ryan and Friedberg regarding “virtual reality,” as they variously define it; there are important differences. Rather, I mean to highlight the connections and affinities between concepts of immersion and virtuality and the potentialities of digital media: to be immersed in a representation, rendering, or construction, especially one made available via the various (and sometimes partially effaced)

interfaces of mediatization, is to interact with the other-than-real, or at least other-than-actual, in a way that calls to mind the counterfeit anxiety of the holodeck. What will happen, these anxieties demand, when the boundary or proscenium or frame is unclear--when we cannot turn off the simulation, or discern its difference from the real? Immersion, as a notion, is both a wonder and a bugaboo, the latter constantly threatening that immersive experience will lead the unaware or uncared-for into a wholly artificial world that is, despite its attractiveness, fundamentally a cheat.

### ***Perversity and schizophrenia.***

Offering Microsoft's *The Beast* as an exemplar of ARGs is intended not only to represent the genre and expose some of the processes that created its canonical framework, but to contextualize anxieties similar to these, anxieties about ARGs' potential power as immersive, pervasive games. Notions of immersion as total and overwhelming have drawn criticism from contemporary games scholars and designers, like Salen and Zimmerman, but when gone unquestioned have figured immersive, pervasive games like ARGs as frighteningly potent engines of an uncontainable hyperreality. In a paper on "the performance of belief in pervasive play," McGonigal--after defining immersion more expansively than Murray but defining pervasive gaming somewhat more narrowly than Montola et al--used a telling anecdote to introduce the particular possibilities of a game that is both pervasive and immersive:

Last March, I had the opportunity to give a brief talk on the topic of pervasive play at an international colloquium for digital researchers, engineers and artists. As I hurried through my PowerPoint presentation— as usual, at least a few slides too many — my tongue started to have trouble keeping up with my laptop. Despite the difficulty, I ventured on in pursuit of my immediate goal: to convey to the audience the often overlooked difference between the general category of



*pervasive play* and the more particular sub-genre of *immersive games*. Pervasive play, I explained, consists of “mixed reality” games that use mobile, ubiquitous and embedded digital technologies to create virtual playing fields in everyday spaces. Immersive games, I continued, are a *form* of pervasive play distinguished by the added element of their (somewhat infamous) “This is not a game” rhetoric. They do everything in their power to erase game boundaries – physical, temporal and social — and to obscure the metacommunications that might otherwise announce, “This is play.”

Shortly after I finished this opening explanation, slides advancing but tongue retreating, verbal disaster struck. I opened my mouth to say “pervasive” while my brain stuck on “immersive,” and out popped a hybrid moniker: “*perversive* gaming.” The slip was met with knowing chuckles, and I was struck by the aptness, in my audience’s eyes, of the accidental phrase. *Perverse-ive* gaming. Yes, I imagined many of them thinking, *there is definitely something perverse about pervasive and immersive play*. (italics in original, *Real* 1-2).

In the essay in which she recounts to story of her “inauspicious neologizing,” McGonigal takes on the question of belief, of players’ granting credence to the existence of the virtual, alternate realities posited by ARGs. She describes a recurring experience that followed her early talks about ARGs and “perversive” play:

In that moment . . . I was reminded of the often cynical and occasionally downright alarmed responses I receive when discussing these games with colleagues. I have learned from their reactions that there is already a stigma attached to the more intense forms of immersive and pervasive play, despite the genres’ nascent status. Among many media critics and scholars, there is a growing suspicion of the unruliness of unbounded games and a wariness of their seemingly addictive and life-consuming scenarios. One of my colleagues, after hearing me out on the subject for several hours, dubbed immersive games “schizophrenia machines,” ostensibly designed in their sprawling and all-encompassing format for the sole purpose of turning previously sane players into paranoid, obsessive maniacs. Over the past year, I have encountered some variation of this cynicism and apprehension at every digital culture and gaming conference I have attended and each talk I have given. “There are actual mental illnesses with exactly the same behaviors and thinking patterns as the players you describe,” was the first comment I fielded after one public lecture. Another audience member asked me later, concerned for the players apparently lost in a play trance, “Do they ever wake up from these immersive games?” The words “delusional” and “scary” have come up in my post-talk conversations too many times to count, and no fewer than four new media researchers have contacted me separately to share their concerns that the immersive genre could eventually transform into a commercially, religiously or politically motivated *Ender’s Game*, in which players

would unwittingly find themselves aiding the real life interests of duplicitous, self-serving factions. (2)

Such concerns are reminiscent of Murray's description of immersion as a submersion in an alternate reality--something like a holodeck, with all its alarming, if potentially pleasurable, capabilities. The notion of immersion as a frightening trick, an engagement with a seamless simulation capable of slipping its confines and escaping its boundaries is enabled by definitions, like Murray's, of immersion as total submersion--a total effacement of the frame--and questioned by critics like Salen and Zimmerman, who consider these fears something of a bogeyman, and immersion itself unachievable in the way described by Murray. McGonigal herself points out that fears that immersive, pervasive games will result in mass delusion paint gamers as "a particularly credulous lot," and are predicated on "this notion that players are prone to falling for the games' dissimulative rhetoric" (*Real* 2-3). She argues that rather than credence, this play is better read as a *performance* of belief, more akin to Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief than to a "delusional" commitment to a patently fictional reality.

In order to interrogate the notion of players as "a particularly credulous lot," McGonigal goes to film studies to debunk the imaginary of the credulous spectator. She relates the shifting responses of critics to stories of the fear exhibited by audiences first exposed to early "moving pictures," most famously Lumière's *The Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1895), which allegedly inspired panic as the audience, fully "immersed" in the illusion of the film, failed to realize the virtuality of the train's imminent approach and fled in terror. Both McGonigal and Friedberg cite film historian Tom Gunning's 1989 "An Aesthetic of Astonishment" as a pivotal re-reading of this phenomenon, one that relies not on the idea of a credulous, panicked spectator but of one astonished, perhaps pleasurably so, by the "transformation [of the image] through the new

illusion of projected motion. . . . The astonishment derives from a magical metamorphosis rather than a seamless reproduction of reality” (qtd in Friedberg, 155). In this reading, the presentation of the moving image is spectacular, peculiarly noticeable--the “frame” of an impressive new technology hardly effaced but specifically noticeable in its integration with the produced image. McGonigal, in particular, takes issue with the alleged naivete of the “panicked” audience members, praising Gunning’s rejection of the premise that an audience, even one unused to cinematic feats of representation, was necessarily cowed by illusion. She reads Gunning as “proposing instead that spectators were engaged in a sophisticated, self-aware suspension of disbelief” (*Might Be* 323-4). Of primary importance for McGonigal is the idea that spectators *willfully* framed their own experience, “taking meta-pleasure in consciously admiring the filmmaker’s masterful use of technology” (324). While Gunning himself seems to stop short of characterizing audience response as a calculated and conscious choice, his idea of the “[in] credulous spectator” is useful to McGonigal in her argument that ARG players frame their own experience: that, rather than docile and receptive subjects too easily confused by a simulated reality, they are potent actors, “playful and playful and intentional participants in the creation and maintenance” of illusion. In this, they resemble the negotiating reality TV audiences of Rose and Woods, who co-produce an authenticity for the shows they enjoy consuming. The myth of the credulous spectator in early film--as well as the impossibly credulous gamer troubled by McGonigal--is a rough cognate to the supposedly duped and innocent reality television viewer who accepts the shows’ premises, any claim they make to showcase the naked truth of events, at face value.

***Playing at belief.***

McGonigal distinguishes between *believing* and *playing at belief* in order to counter the idea of immersive play as either dangerous (“schizophrenia machines”) or the province of the foolhardy. Further, she calls this difference an “essential and stubborn distinction” (*Might Be* 320, *Real* 3). Because gamers who invest in the alternate reality spun out by ARGs and their players, she holds, are *playing at believing*, the investment does not involve actual credulity but rather a deeper level of play, in which the refusal to explicitly acknowledge the fictionality of the game constitutes part of the pleasure of its play: “To be clear: I believe the widely assumed credulity and so-called ‘psychological susceptibility’ of immersive and pervasive gamers is, in fact, a strategic performance on the part of the players. And it is my goal to prevent the mistake we as researchers will be making if we fail to recognize the conscious, goal-oriented and pleasurable nature of this affected belief--let alone the very fact that it is affected” (*Real* 4).

If McGonigal’s basic argument about players as overwhelmingly affecting belief as a part of play, rather than being “fooled” by the dissembling of an alternate reality, seems almost self-evident now, the shift might be ascribed to the prevalence of ARG play; since *The Beast*, high profile ARGs have accompanied hit television shows like *Lost* and big budget movies like *Cloverfield* and *The Dark Knight*. As ARGs become more popular, the play they inspire is more easily accepted as normative. It is also possible to see in the alarmist reactions McGonigal cites a culturally and historically specific fear of the kind of potentially overwhelming mediated “immersion” theorized by Murray and others in the late 90s and early 2000s; it is somewhat difficult to imagine a more sophisticated (read: later) audience having concerns about gamers actually losing touch with quotidian reality in favor of investing without reservation in a fictional one that is immersive and pervasive enough to present a workable substitute--especially given that such fictional realities are often highly speculative; the narrative underlying *The Beast*, for

example, is no more “believable” than the sci-fi film it promoted, to say nothing of the way it presumes the events of a future date (2124) could be fixed and known to players in the early twenty-first century.

Nevertheless, some designers and players continue to use the rhetoric of immersion to describe the allure of, and even to suggest a danger present in ARG play. McGonigal herself cites a gamer likening the end of an engrossing ARG to “waking up as if from a long sleep. Your marriage or relationship may be in tatters. Your job may be on the brink of the void, or gone completely. You may have lost a scholarship, or lost or gained too many pounds” (qtd in *Real 3*). The gamer in question might be engaging in a melodramatic exaggeration (“brink of the void”) that is itself pleasurable, or describing a state of affairs she wishes immersive play could achieve rather than one it regularly does. Still, her characterization of ARG play as immersive to the point of danger or confusion is not only hyperbole. It specifically highlights the importance of the appearance of the potential for risk, or professed belief in that possibility, to the pleasure ARG play generates. Put more simply, in describing those high stakes, she heightens the pleasure of *the game of believing*, which is not precisely the same “game” as the puzzle-solving or narrative reconstructing that ARGs require, although the TINAG aesthetic makes these two game elements difficult to sever from one another. McGonigal notes that this gamer subsequently wrote a “recovery guide” to assist immersed ARG players in emerging from game play at a game’s end—but adds that the author was, in the end, more interested in “*extending*, rather than recovering from, the game play: ‘Now here we are, every one of us excited at blurring the lines between story and reality. The game promises to become not just entertainment, but our lives’” (*Real 3*, emphasis added). The pleasure of belief, of imagining a risk of total, subsuming immersion that the game does not actually hold, was that great.

Szulborski also uses the rhetoric of immersion to describe ARG play, but suggests an inversion is in order: “In an alternate reality game, the goal is not to immerse the player in the artificial world of the game; instead, a successful game immerses the world of the game into the everyday existence and life of the player . . . You don’t really want the player to think of the game world as an alternate reality at all . . . [T]he ARG creator is trying, not to create an alternate reality, but to change the player’s *existing* world into the alternate reality” (31, emphasis added). Szulborski’s characterization does not deny immersion, nor suggest it as a deeply committed affectation, but rather considers ARGs’ immersive work to expand for the player the potential for masquerade and disguise in the actual world around her--the potential for the news she receives, the objects she encounters (movie posters, emails, websites), and even the people she meets to function in multiple, possibly hidden registers. If these games are immersive, it may be the “real” world, more than the designed fiction of the game, in which they effectively immerse players as those players engage with their actual surroundings in new ways and according to different logics. McGonigal refers to something like this when she describes, gamers who, in addition to performing belief, “choose to affect a powerful *incredulity*”: the playful refusal to acknowledge “real life” as *not* a game, not an investigable and potentially solvable puzzle that surrounds them at all times with hidden but meaningful patterns and clues.

### ***Misleading skins and the rhetoric of dissimulation.***

In order to describe this particular characteristic of ARG play--the existence and importance of real-world objects that function in multiple registers, like the *A.I.* movie poster that held coded game information relating to *The Beast*--McGonigal applies Donald A. Norman’s [1988] notion of “affordances” (qtd in McGonigal *Might Be* 19). McGonigal describes

affordances as “physical properties that invite action and interaction; as such, they are the domain of the material, embodied world.” She uses the notion of affordance to describe the wealth, or at least variety, of possibilities of interactive media or virtual objects--in comparison to, for example, still images, which represent objects but afford no further interactive opportunity: “They invite only perception, recognition” (19). For McGonigal, one of the possibilities catalyzed by life in an ubiquitous computing environment is the increased availability of opportunities for interaction which do not advertise themselves, but wait to be discovered through experimentation or work fully in the background, never offering an explicit interface. This difference replaces a “disproportionate focus on the non-actionable skins of things” with a “curiosity about how we might digitally reproduce not just the image, but also *the interactive features*, or phenomena, of their original referents” (20).

By way of an example, McGonigal references Magritte’s famous “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe*”. “The treachery of Magritte’s image without [its famous] disclaimer,” she writes, “would be to mislead the viewer into eliding the difference between what is real and what is mimetic of the real” (*Might Be* 3). The caption emphasizes the ontological difference between an actual pipe and its semblance or representation. She contrasts this with an imaginary object which is also not a pipe, but appears to be one--or, rather, “*is not only a pipe*” (7). She cites Rich Gold’s idea of

a “Magritte’s Ubi-Pipe of the not-so-distant future,” describing it as having the appearance of an ordinary pipe, but *secretly* containing a range of interactive systems: “a location device so it knows where it is, a small microphone for speaking to friends... [and] a pointing device that works with large, wall-sized, electronic displays (to be used during lectures, say)” (72). It might also possess, Gold notes, the surprising network-enabled abilities of “detecting legal and illegal areas of smoking” and also “monitoring vital medical signs” (72).

McGonigal's work on affordances is couched in terms of ubiquitous computing, or ubicomp, which she sees as less invested in semblance or reproduction as "the earlier technological culture of simulation." In an ubicomp world, she sees focus shifting from powerful acts of simulation to masterful *dissimulation*:

In both cases, what you see is not necessarily what you get, but for very different reasons. In a world of computer-driven simulation . . . appearances *make empty promises*. The image is not in fact the thing itself, the referent, but rather simply one of infinitely many cognitively convincing references. However, in a world of computer-driven dissimulation, that is to say in the secret "inner life" scenario, appearances *feign a lack of promise*. The seemingly ordinary object conceals its own extraordinary capabilities. The simulation, the reproduction of semblances, likes to show-off. It aggressively and proudly demonstrates its mimetic charms to you. The dissimulation, the reproduction of systems, on the other hand, is coy. It reveals its true affordances only to those who pay special attention, who investigate its properties further than the surface. (6)

I dwell on McGonigal's fascination with hidden affordances (or, more properly, the potential for a context suffused with ubiquitous computing which propagates such affordances) not only because they are a key part of ARG play (the movie poster which is also a hidden message and a way into a complex mystery), but because the ubicomp context she discusses is one in which the priority of the traditionally assumed danger and possibilities of mimetic semblance is interrupted. She emphasizes "the ubiquity of *visual reproduction* in contemporary computing culture," "the profusion of digital images" which makes for a "promiscuous visibility--semblances [which] allow themselves to be reproduced by anyone, anywhere, anytime" (2). It is the reproducible semblance--the "skin," she calls it, borrowing from Gold--that "current technology" desires. However, she suggests that in a context of ubiquitous computing, this "disproportionate focus on the non-actionable skins of things" will give way to a currently "underdeveloped curiosity about



how we might digitally reproduce not just the image, but also *the interactive features*, or phenomena, of their original referents.” Instead of “endlessly replicated and recontextualized skins,” attention will move from the skins themselves onto the “functionality and interactivity that we might also associate with the referent” (2-3).

Though McGongial describes the vaguely threatening notion of “ubiquitous imaging” and its promiscuity of replicated and recontextualized images as something of a canard, at least for those more interested in the potential paradigm shift signaled by the advent of ubiquitous computing, I find her characterization of it compelling in terms of this study’s earlier consideration of surfaces and mimicry. After all, it is just this sort of media-enabled promiscuity that makes possible the Wooster Group’s daring adventures in mimetic semblance; her descriptions of easily replicated skins and their recontextualization sound like a typical Wooster Group technique--as in the Burton/Shepherd situation described in the first chapter--if one that works in a more complex and mischievous way than the efficient “conductors of cognitive concepts” she describes. In a world of rapidly replicated and disseminated image-semblances, she writes, “We know what the skins *mean*, or at least what they mean to call to mind” (3).

However, here, the mauled skins do not so efficiently connote the referent. Rather than act as conductors, in *Hamlet*, skins are precisely what are being interrupted, their links with meaning rendered as spotty, inconsistent, or multiple. In the performance, surface replication, both in terms of the (vulnerable, interrupted) video record and Shepherd’s embodied imitation bring to *mind* a referent (or two, or more), but also bring it into question. Though there are few hidden affordances in *Hamlet* in terms of the unadvertised functionality of objects, there is certainly a resonance with the notion in terms of the untrustworthiness of surfaces. If an apparent pipe can function as a smoking-area-detection device and laser pointer, not only is its “skin” the least of

its substance but its work in disturbing the relationships between surface and core, skin and content, is a potent theatricality poised to threaten further correlations between outward sign and meaningful interiority. Shepherd may adopt Burton's "skin" by assuming his posture, his line readings, his gestures; in the Wooster Group *Hamlet*, what lies "underneath" is no longer assumed to be passion--in fact, there may no longer be an "underneath" assumed.

### ***Unexpected affordances.***

Montola and his co-authors credit the notion of "*infinite affordances*" as a characteristic of some pervasive games--the idea that, at least mathematically, in a pervasive game like *Assassin*, the possible combinations of game choice afforded by the game's rules, environment, and objects, are infinite--to McGonigal (17, italics in original). In fact, in their book *Pervasive Gaming*, the idea is twice credited to McGonigal; once as an idea introduced in her 2006 doctoral dissertation, and later in a 2007 talk on massively collaborative play (17, 77). However, searching the text of both those works for the term yields no results. Confused by this, I wrote to McGonigal in late 2011 to ask for clarification, and she responded that she had no memory of using the terms together, and in any case was not invested in infinite affordances as a notion ("Re: infinite affordances").

However it was conceived, a notion of "infinite affordances" seems like an easy target for criticism from those who would point out the overwhelming, omnipresent social and normative limitations of players' actions; the game's pervasive nature and real-world environment do not exempt its players from social disciplining or legal restriction, for example. I find this challenge more than valid, and agree that games scholars--and anyone thinking critically about pervasive gaming--should take care not to presume unwarranted utopian or liberatory potential for these

games regardless of the permeability of their boundaries or the wide range of actions available to players. However, the modifier “infinite” may not presume any kind of omnipotence on the part of the gamer. Rather, as Montola et al’s definition takes care to denote, what may be “infinite” is the *combination* of allowable and conceivable actions (combined with elements of chance provided by “real world” elements), not the scope of actions from which a gamer may choose. The debate may be semantic, but even given that social and other constraints are not lifted during game play, the idea of “infinite affordances” highlights the comparatively wide range of choices and combinations of choices available to gamers, as well as the unpredictability of their fellow gamers (who can make use of a similarly wide range of affordances) and unpredictable environmental elements, without actually implying that pervasive games are so liberating that “anything is possible.” McGonigal herself points this out concisely by pointing to chess, a game with clear boundaries and rigidly limited affordances (at least within rules for orthodox play) as a game that “can be approached with endlessly many different strategies, each strategic effort changing the future possibilities in the problem space. As one famous chess saying goes, ‘Chess is infinite’” (*Reality* Kindle Locations 5123-5124). So much more so, then, a game like *Assassin*, where, as Montola et al point out, “any object can hold game significance, whether incidental or designed, and whether or not participants realize it” (18).

A debate about whether or not affordances in a pervasive game may be considered *infinite* is, at any rate, less important for the study at hand than a consideration of what *unexpected* affordances might yield. Affordances of in-game objects in ARGs are often disguised--actually, twice disguised: first, as a “mere” movie poster/blog, or blog entry/or other such real world object when really they function also as an in-game asset (which makes ferreting them out a

pleasurable and productive game activity), and second, “disguised” in that the information or game material they present is often heavily coded as a puzzle: in order to find the rabbit hole for *The Beast*, player/observers had first to be open to the idea of a movie poster or trailer as carrying extra meaning or opportunity, and then also had to de-code the game content (by counting the notches and doing something with those numbers, for example, or by googling Jeannine Salla and calling or emailing her and the unearthed number/address).

These unexpected affordances do two things: they provide challenge, through the solving of puzzles and codes that are a large part of ARG play, and they contribute to TINAG by presenting the game not as such, but as a product of a reality, a “real life” reality, that is always itself a mystery, in which things are other than they seem. ARGs not only suggest the reality of a fictional narrative, but they suggest “real life” as teeming with explorable, exploitable hidden affordances--a place in which a movie poster might also hold clues usable for solving a murder. In a particularly “meta” example, an ARG was launched via a “straight”-seeming newspaper story about 42 Entertainment, the company that designed and ran the very popular ARG *I Love Bees*, which promoted the computer/video/console game *Halo 2* and employed some of the same designers and writers responsible for *The Beast*. The newspaper story (in the East Bay Express), written by/credited to a journalist named Alex Handy, contained the rabbit hole for an embedded ARG about the fictional disappearance of Handy. The article, a profile of 42’s Elan Lee, began with an almost spoof-like bit of text that not only demonstrated an ARG-like tone for the readership, but concomitantly seeded the article with clues for solving the embedded game:

Never stop searching.  
The clues are there.  
Alex Handy is missing; find him.  
Remember:

You just need to know where to look, dear Watson.

Stop reading for a moment and scan your surroundings for anything that might be lying to you: Strangers. Classified ads. Billboards. Phones. Radio shows. The Internet. Games. Classified ads? Be warned, this isn't an article. This isn't a newspaper. And it sure as hell isn't a game. Lies, all lies.

Various classified ads in the paper turned out to hide clues and puzzles essential to working out Handy's "location," the object of the game (something players uncovered within 36 hours, according to Handy's bio at the *San Francisco Examiner* website). The above text also, however, holds a "clue" to the power of unexpected affordances: while ARGs may seem to ask players to imagine an alternate reality or speculative future (in the case of *The Beast*) that can stand in for or even replace more mundane actual circumstances, what they actually offer is a fictional, optional circumstance *superimposable* on and integrated into player's daily lives. That is, players' ordinary lives are not the prison from which fictions allow them to escape, but rather everyday contexts suddenly exposed as playful grounds for exploration. The logic of unexpected affordances is key to ARG play not only because it provides a mechanic for hiding information, but because of what it suggests about the quotidian life that pervasive ARG play "pervades" into--that it is full of mystery, that it hides evidence of secrets, so much so that it is capable of containing other realities inside it.

***The persistent reality of performed belief.***

Szulborski suggests something like this when he argues that ARGs help players escape *into* their "ordinary" lives rather than away from them. It is also what McGonigal references by the aforementioned "powerful incredulity" she believes is affected by players: a playfully defiant unwillingness to accept that the "actionable surfaces of things" adequately describes the objects

and messages that make up their realities, that the objects and happenings around them may or must be hiding additional information, additional capabilities.

Significantly, McGonigal characterizes this incredulity as affected, performed; she suggests that gamers are “playing at disbelief” the same way she argues they are playing at, or performing believing. While I appreciate the McGonigal’s initial distinction, and agree with her generally, I retain a healthy skepticism about whether performing, or even “playing at” believing is so essentially and entirely distinct from belief itself. After all, it seems probable that forms of belief--religious belief, for example--that are commonly appreciated as “real” and unaffected (or at least not consciously affected as in ARG play), are performative and come into existence through practice and citation. It seems probable, too, that there is no form of belief that cannot be said to be “affected”; if belief is largely (or even just sometimes) performative the distinction between belief and *performing believing* seems to me less stable than McGonigal implies.

It is admittedly difficult, sometimes, to distinguish my own intervention into this subject from Jane McGonigal’s; when I began this project, I knew of her work but had not read her dissertation, one chapter of which (“Dangerous Mimesis”) accomplished, to my concomitant delight and dismay, some--much--of what I had originally planned to do in this chapter: not only to examine the role-playing or make-believe that ARGs require in terms of mimesis and theatricality, but specifically to debunk the idea that such play presented a fearful threat, some kind of *Matrix* that might swallow players whole or colonize them for nefarious purposes. To the extent to which games associated with big-budget movies or television series work as extensive marketing efforts (especially for transmedial narratives or story-worlds like the aforementioned *Matrix*, which spread themselves across all manner of media, from graphic novels to web content to video games), perhaps this is not so far from true; however willful and conscious McGonigal

casts ARG players as being, extended play under a corporate brand canopy must affect players in ways they do not, themselves, fully control. Taking issue with the idea that the belief at stake in ARGs is somehow dangerous and harmful, however, turns out to be work accomplished before I arrived on the scene.

However, McGonigal debunks the myth of credulous ARG players (and the threatening immersive fictions they enjoy) precisely by maintaining a stable--an “essential and stubborn”--distinction between belief and a “performance of belief.” Such a stance holds that gamers are not credulous, but also that the performance (of belief) is not “real” (belief). I remain, as I have noted, dubious about the stability of the separation of belief and its performance; I am similarly critical of the apparently stable and essential difference McGonigal sees between the appearance, the strategic performance, of “a profoundly blurred line” between quotidian reality and the fantasy world of the game, and any actual, practical blurring of that boundary (*Might Be* 336). For McGonigal, the former follows from the latter: the pretense of belief is the pretense of coinciding realities, and any actual coincidence of realities would require actual belief in the fantastic game circumstances, something she persuasively denies is likely. I argue, however, that such blurring can occur without the “particularly credulous” stance (on the part of gamers) she so effectively argues against.

In equating a liminal, mixed reality with credence and delusion, McGonigal rather forecloses the possibility for ARGs to enact multiple realities, since she lumps a “blurred” reality together with the delusion, the impossible credulity that she thoroughly discredits. She makes this clear in a passage from her dissertation in which she emphasizes that she believes gamers’ professed immersion into the alternate reality of the game to be part of a strategic performance: she admits that gamers’ own testimony to the immersive potential of the games (think of the

player who wrote the “recovery guide” for exiting immersive ARGs) “paint[s] a remarkable picture of a profoundly blurred line between games and reality.” She does not, however, take those gamers at their words: “I do not proffer [these testimonies] as evidence of any *actual* confusion or delusion on the part of [gamers]. I do not take them at face value. Rather, I present them as evidence of a strategic, collective performance” (*Might Be* 321, emphasis mine). For McGonigal, a “profoundly blurred line” is tantamount to an impossibly naive gamer. What this equation leaves out is what I argue constitutes the most interesting and efficacious aspect of ARG play: the potential for a blurring that results not from delusion, but from the power of gamers to integrate the games’ fictions into the practices their daily lives.

### ***The power and potential of playfully mixed realities.***

There is potential, after all, for ARGs and their players to blur that boundary without requiring something like naive belief in the fictional game world. In fact, McGonigal’s own (with Ken Eklund) *World Without Oil* stands as one of the most compelling examples of productively mixed and muddied game and non-game realities--even though (or perhaps because) by ARG standards, it engaged in relatively little subterfuge to efface its frame as a game and present a narrative to players framed as truth, like *The Beast* did, rather than as fantasy or fiction. In *World Without Oil*, there was no real rabbit hole; the existence of the game itself was not a “secret” to be figured out. There was still a frame--the oil crisis in the game was fictional, if less frankly incredible than the story of *The Beast*, and the game’s presentation involved a fictional group of eight characters who sketched the specifics of the crisis and interacted with players--but *WWO* was not a “traditional” ARG in that it contained no central enigma, no trail of puzzles for players to solve collaboratively in order to unearth a narrative that they could then



“perform believing” in. As McGonigal later posted on *Unfiction* (a major ARG hub online), about a similar but later project, *EVOKE*, “this is not by any means a typical puzzly ARG. Think more *Top Secret Dance Off*<sup>46</sup> or *World Without Oil*.” *EVOKE* mirrored the earlier *World Without Oil*, McGonigal let the community know, in that “there's no curtain to worry about here. This is not an ARG in any ‘this is a not a game’ sense, it's an ARG in an ‘alter reality’ or ‘change the real world’ sense. So please don't worry about any in-game, out-of-game, in front of curtain, or behind the curtain thing. There's no mystery about what this game is or how to play it once it launches -- it's 10 weeks, with 10 episodes, 10 quests, and 10 missions” (unfiction).

Still, playing *World Without Oil* explicitly meant adopting the game reality as if it were happening, a subjunctive, arguably immersive move that *does* making involve in-game and out-of-game distinctions, even if in this case referring to the game openly as such was not verboten. While players could freely discuss *World Without Oil* as a game during play, many were also writing blog posts from within the game reality, in the earnest voice of an individual trying to live through an oil shock. This type of game activity involved the invention and assumption of an in-game persona for whom a world “without” oil was not an optional pastime. In this sense, TINAG was still partially in effect, or ruled *some* kinds of play, if not all. This holds true in many of McGonigal’s games, and in particular those that take, as *World Without Oil* does, a thorny real-world problem as their subject. The overwhelming importance of TINAG takes a backseat in these games to McGonigal’s overwhelming commitment to “leverage the power of games to reinvent everything from government, health care, and education to traditional media,

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<sup>46</sup> In *Top Secret Dance Off* (2008), participants fulfilled dance “quests” by uploading video of themselves dancing, disguised, in public places. One quest challenged dancers to cross a street dancing; another asked them to dance upside down. The game, designed by McGonigal “to make players happier in their everyday lives,” was not an ARG in any sense, but shared McGonigal’s commitment to using games to affect positive change in the “real” world.

marketing, and entrepreneurship—even world peace” (*Broken Kindle Locations* 218-219). In some games, like *Top Secret Dance Off* or *Cruel 2 B Kind*, the goal is, maybe deceptively, smaller scale: to increase happiness on the parts of players and those with whom they come into contact. In others (including *SuperBetter*, a game McGonigal innovated to assist her own recovery from a traumatic brain injury), the goal is dramatically practical: to bring the playfulness, challenge and engagement of gaming to bear on intractable real-world problems.

Precisely *because* they better integrate actual, ordinary and out-of-game elements into play, these games offer compelling evidence of a blurred boundary between game fiction and reality, even better than more traditional ARGs, like *The Beast*, that never admit their own gameness. In fact, they offer evidence not only of that blur, but of its practical efficacy. In *World Without Oil*, McGonigal deliberately crafted a game explicitly framed as a subjunctive fiction rather than a pre-existing reality seeded and scattered for gamers to uncover and piece together (although this particular “fiction” was buttressed by the generalized, received truth of the world’s finite oil supply). The fictionality and “gameness” of the game was never masked: McGonigal announced the existence of the game in her keynote address at the 2007 Serious Games Summit, and, with Ken Eklund, extended a general invitation to the public. In an announcement for the game, the designers and promoters named it as such, as a game, something *The Beast* would never have countenanced. “World Without Oil: Play It Before You Live It,” the announcement entreated, calling explicit attention to the scenario’s identity as playful, as game. “You know it’s bad for you. You’ll cut back someday. On April 30, join a World Without Oil—and play it before you live it” (*Broken Kindle Locations* 4932-4933).

And still, despite the overt nature of the fiction, a practical blurring of the boundaries between game fiction and gamers’ actual circumstances resulted --one simultaneously playful

and earnest, but never delusional. This co-mingling of fantasy reality and actuality was abetted precisely by the game's emphasis on player subjunctivity, which spurred the creation of game content by players themselves according to their imagined and lived realities while taking part in the game. Instead of presenting a fractured narrative and ask players to assemble it and treat it as "real," McGonigal presented an open, explicitly fictional scenario and asked players to engineer their own responses to it through the practice of acting "as-if". From the game website's FAQ section on WWO's "methods and goals":

By design, the WWO game did not dictate points of view or outcomes to the players. The WWO team established realistic macroparameters of the oil shock (such as the price and availability of fuel on any given week) but relied on the players to successfully imagine how those macroparameters would change everyday life. By design, WWO "crowdsourced" the ramifications of a global oil shock as experienced at the local, personal level – knowing that by doing so, the collective imagination would see outcomes that elude even experts in the field.

While all ARGs require some version of a similar subjective stance, at least to the extent that TINAG requires gamers to act "as if" the game were not a game, *World Without Oil* depended on the game's subjunctivity as a generative engine since the majority of game content was player-produced: proffered documentation of players imagining their lives within the game scenario, and/or attempting to make actual change based on those imagined realities. Participants told their own, imagined--and sometimes transmedially performed--stories via blog posts, emails, and uploaded video diary entries telling of their "experiences" during the fictional oil shortage. Players exercised the same subjunctivity in response to the game's challenge to address the imagined problems in creative ways. Some of the suggested coping strategies resembled conventional attempts to conserve resources (especially fossil fuels) and reduce waste, but others moved away from already-standard ideas about conservation. Some players imagined, for example, a greater need for communal assistance in times of difficulty and suggested various

strategies for making better relationships with neighbors, in order to facilitate the sharing of scarce resources.

And, as previously noted, some of the responses to the imagined scenario were practical changes that exceeded the game's (admittedly permeable) frame. Among the game materials archived at the *A to Z: A World Beyond Oil* page at the official *World Without Oil* site include ruminations about parenting, dating and religious observation during an oil shortage. One of the players cited by McGonigal in a recap of the game "forecasted that pretty soon—peak oil or not—she would no longer have a job. As a result, at the end of the game she decided to go back to school in real life to prepare for a new career in a postoil [*sic*] economy" (*Broken Kindle Locations 4999-5000*). The archived "meta FAQ" at the *World Without Oil* site ("The Game, Explained") specifically describes changes like these as actual: "For these people [the players] and over 60,000 active observers, the process of collectively imagining and collaboratively chronicling the oil shock brought strong insight about oil dependency and energy policy. More than mere[ly] 'raising awareness,' *World Without Oil* made the issues *real*, and this in turn led to real engagement and real change in people's lives." The game designers' description of change as "real" is somewhat difficult to interrogate, but Eklund and McGonigal seem satisfied that *World Without Oil* was successful in its goal of forecasting a possible reality in order to crowdsource coping strategies--and, in the materials that survive the game, are particularly emphatic about the actuality of changes the game brought about in the lives of some of its players.

McGonigal's game, as might be expected, makes clear that the real "magic" of ARGs is not their ability to seduce presumably smart and sane players into believing a frankly outrageous fiction. Rather, games like *World Without Oil* and other works of McGonigal's, including

*Superstruct* and *EVOKE*, harness the powerful subjunctive practice that forms the backbone of ARGs to rehearse strategies for dealing with real-world difficulty and to effect actual change. These are McGonigal's own games, and she very clearly believes in their potential for changing, influencing, and innovating actual circumstances and practices--her 2010 book, *Reality Is Broken*, provocatively suggests that what the "real world" needs is intervention by game designers to boost the immersive and engaging potential of "the world at large":

Instead of providing gamers with better and more immersive alternatives to reality, I want all of us to be responsible for providing the world at large with a better and more immersive reality. I want gaming to be something that everybody does, because they understand that games can be a real solution to problems and a real source of happiness. I want games to be something everybody learns how to design and develop, because they understand that games are a real platform for change and getting things done. (Kindle Locations 304-307)

Despite McGonigal's prior association of a "blurring" between reality and fiction with implausible player naivete, this practical co-incidence of the real and virtual aspects of ARGs depends not on credence, but on the subjunctive (and theatrical) as-if: legible as fiction, effective as "real" and actual action. I contend not only that proffering games as a "real platform for change" is legible as a coincidence of the game fiction and actuality--a blurred line, something like Castronova's porous membrane--but that the difference between my stance and McGonigal's is not merely semantic. Despite my clear appreciation of the work McGonigal does debunking the myth of credulous gamers and dangerous, mind-bending game-simulations, I hold that there is such a blurring, though it looks nothing like the "schizophrenia" early critics feared, and that such a blurring is the most exciting opportunity the genre holds, one specifically mobilized by McGonigal in her own work toward "real" change.

*Savvy gamers: action in excess of strategy.*

In her earlier writings, particularly her dissertation, McGonigal's emphasis on gamer agency and savviness is what makes her utopian vision for a game-fueled world possible--as well as a factor that helps disprove the notion of them as hapless dupes. As she asserts that gamers are not actually confused or deluded about the "realness" of ARGs' titular alternate realities, McGonigal also implies that gamers are not only invested in but tacitly *in charge of* their performances of belief, that those performances are purposeful and strategic. As she unpacks and celebrates gamers' strategic choices about when, where and how to present their affect, I believe she may underestimate the potency of gamers' *unchosen* behaviors, the ways the games affect players' actions in ways the players may not expect, choose, or even detect. Mark Andrejevic's critique of the savvy viewer in the previous chapter, it seems to me, might be profitably brought to bear on McGonigal's own critique of gamer naiveté: Andrejevic's canny suspicion of reality TV viewers' knowing savviness--that such certainty might obscure the ways in which viewers are not in-the-know, providing the means by which they can be hoodwinked in more subtle ways--can also serve as a critique of gamer savviness, their strategic deployment of performances of belief. While players are certainly more sophisticated than ARGs' earlier and most fearful critics gave them credit for, they do not fully command the games' influence. Even shrewd players who marshal their affect strategically can only strategize so far, remaining always vulnerable to the unexpected effects of their gaming practices. These effects--the ways game play affects players' "real" lives in practical and unexpected ways--are less threatening than delusion, certainly, but stand as credible evidence of a "blurring" of game-world and actuality--a mixed reality less frightening than the pathological one McGonigal argues against when she

equates a “profoundly blurred line between games and reality” with “confusion or delusion,” but a powerfully mixed reality nonetheless (*Might Be* 321).

Somewhat ironically, this power of ARGs to effect change in their players--change the players themselves can never fully control--is something McGonigal at other turns readily celebrates. In her dissertation’s rehearsal of the ideas that she would later offer in *Reality Is Broken*, she shares a provocative story in order to illustrate the potency of ARGs’ potential: a communication between the Cloudmakers, a committed group of gamers that convened around and collaborated to solve *The Beast*, after the events of September 11, 2001 (well after *The Beast* had concluded):

In [the] first wave of posts, the Cloudmakers’ messages reflected shock, uncertainty, the need to connect to friends and families, and a desire to rally in support of the victims—in other words, they were quite typical of the widespread online messaging that occurred in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

By early afternoon, however, the content and tone of the Cloudmakers’ conversations had changed. A small but vocal minority began advocating a *ludic*, or playful, response to the terrorist attacks. Their proposition: treat 9/11 like a game—specifically, like *The Beast*, the massively-multiplayer puzzle game they had recently solved—and play it.

This ludic approach to 9/11 first appeared on the message board at 12:29 PM Eastern Time the day of the attacks. A Cloudmaker, or CM for short, wrote: “since I found out about this today, I could do nothing but think of the CMs group. ... I AM IN NO WAY ATTEMPTING TO MAKE LIGHT OF SITUATION. However, the whole thing has caught my interest and I know that this sort of thing is sorta our MO. Picking things apart and figuring them out” (Mullins #44272). (*Might Be* 273-4)

As McGonigal reports, the post’s author made it clear he realized that his desire to “apply a gaming modus operandi” to the events, to treat the unknowns surrounding the tragedy as a puzzle, could be deeply offensive. Still, despite this gamer’s apparent awareness of the controversial nature of his suggestion, “Mullins felt hailed by 9/11 first and foremost as a gamer” (274). There is a disjuncture, here, between the apparently “real” feeling of being “hailed . . . as a gamer” and the “powerful incredulity” McGonigal has suggested is only

strategically affected by players. When players confess or proudly announce that long after a game experience is over, they cannot help but look constantly for unexpected affordances, question given narratives, and seek puzzles where none are immediately apparent, they may certainly be exaggerating their helplessness or their dedication, but it seems prudent to suggest that such behavior--that incredulity referenced by McGonigal--may not always or entirely be affected or consciously “performed.” The player testimony above suggests that this shift is not completely contained within a voluntary and strategic choice on the part of the gamer. Being “hailed by 9/11 as a gamer” may reflect a consciously affected identity, but also speaks to an “MO” which has exceeded strategic participation and effectively pervaded into tragically real circumstances. “Mullins,” in his or her carefully worded offer, seems drawn into the gameness of the situation not entirely voluntarily, reflecting a changed perspective on the world that he or she does not fully strategically control.

The changes in perspective that play provokes in its subjects--something McGonigal herself holds up often as an undervalued and practically useful aspect of game play--seems unlikely to be always, or only, strategically affected. While play is certainly voluntary (and any professed, sincere belief in a clearly fictional game circumstance is certainly affected), McGonigal’s own work suggests that the change wrought in gamers by the adoption and practice of the subjunctive stance--the as-if the game invites/requires--is not entirely the result of willful acts, ones that the gamer controls and purposefully deploys. It is clear that game effects can also occur as unexpected, unsought and uncontrollable consequences, and be no less practically real. Indeed, part of the pleasure of couching an experience like *World Without Oil* as a game, rather than a less playful examination, is that sort of opportunity for unexpected wonder: no one knows how a game will play out, and the indeterminacy of its effects on players is part of the



excitement. There is an opportunity for—even an expectation of—change that is produced by, but also exceeds, the “strategic, collective performance” that McGonigal argues “playing at belief” to be; while such strategy may be a technique the gamer mindfully employs, it can certainly result in unplanned effects of the game (or of play) on the player. Similarly, when she describes *Cruel 2 B Kind* as a “happiness hack,” McGonigal is not only suggesting it as a way to increase quality of life for players and those they encounter during the moments of play (as they are giving and receiving “positive” social interactions), but suggesting it as a platform from which the richly various and unexpected results of those supposedly happiness-inducing interactions can be examined:

[A]s the players get bolder and teams get larger, strangers are more likely to be clued in to the unusual nature of the activity and provoked to wonder why everyone is making such showy efforts of gratitude and kindness. This is one of the intended effects of the game—to reveal if friendly gestures are considered out of place, and to provoke people to wonder why exactly that is. (*Reality* Kindle Locations 3208-3210)

Though she does not specifically address the possibility that in-game tasks might not be universally productive of happiness or pleasure (some of the suggested “weapons” for kindness-doing include actions which, depending on context or player affect, might be received threatening, puzzling or even offensive: “Tell your targets, ‘You look gorgeous today!’” “Wink and smile at your targets”), the intention that *C2BK* should provoke continued questioning of the nature and implications of “friendly gestures” suggests the ways in which the game’s effects outlast the game temporally, and entirely probably manifest themselves in ways that exceed the strategically chosen affects of the players (*Reality* Kindle Locations 3196-3197). To my eye, these “real” changes *are* the blurring that McGonigal denies happens during pervasive and immersive play.

*The real effects of enacting playful realities.*

If ARG players are “performing believing” in something *as if* it were real, they are also, through the game, *performing* realness, by which I mean to say they perform it into being-- recognize and render reality as performative. Like mediated theater and reality TV, ARGs (and their players) alter and create realities as well as project or reflect realities. These players make their play real through performance, investing in virtual or fictional circumstances in order to produce real action, change and consequence. In providing an environment in which affecting belief (playing as-if) is pleasurable and exciting--is *play*--ARGs (at least playfully) replace the threat of a fraudulent simulation with the play of enacting a reality both illusory and rooted in the actual, as in the virtual reality of theatrical production. In their rehearsals of alternate realities, players are recognizing reality as enactable and plural. Better yet, the enacted reality of the game mixes fantasy and actuality, making use of illusion, but also actual artifacts, people and practices, creating a hybrid reality that reconfigures players’ relationships with the notion of reality itself.

What I have described throughout this chapter as the subjunctive action of acting-as-if, common both to conscious role play and to theatrical acting, was, unsurprisingly, deeply important to Stanislavski, whose commitment to authenticity--something like “honesty;” “real” experiencing--in performance is a major theoretical preoccupation of this work’s investigation of the ways in which realness is performed in media-inflected contexts. McGonigal herself recognizes the resonance between what Stanislavski called “the use of ‘if’” and the affected belief of ARG players (48). She describes Stanislavski’s precepts as “oriented toward an external display of belief,” producing a “stage-simulated belief” in patently fictional circumstances” (*Might Be* 361). Interestingly, McGonigal does not refer to Stanislavski’s own

writings when she explores this parallel, but to one of his later interpreters: “Stanislavski-trained director and acting coach” Charles J. McGaw, author of a text called *Acting is Believing* (361). McGaw “proposes that ‘acting is literally a matter of “make-believe”’(7),” and “stresses the ‘ever-present realization that it is only play’ (46)” (qtd in *Might Be* 361). In a move that links her thorough critique of the imaginary of a naive and vulnerable gamer with a similar critique of “Method” actors’ potential to lose themselves in an imagined, theatrical reality, McGonigal argues that, *pace* McGaw, “It is not the goal of an actor to become consumed by a ‘for real’ belief, but rather to develop a conscious and strategic performance of belief that retains its mimetic frame” (*Might Be* 361).

As befits her larger argument, McGonigal focuses on the strategy and control by which this affect is mobilized by actors, and rather downplays the extent to which Stanislavski himself issued some complicated and sometimes ambiguous instructions to his actors in insisting that this simulated belief have the imprimatur of truth. When Stanislavski’s alter ego Tortsov explains the power of “if” to his students, he creates an urgent fictional scenario in which one of his students is giving a house-warming in an apartment previously inhabited by a “raving lunatic,” who *may* have escaped:

‘What if it turned out he had escaped and was there, outside the door, what would you do . . . . [W]hat would you do if the story I have just invented were really true?’ (47)

When the students respond with improvised dramatic action, Tortsov pays them the ultimate compliment: “I can say that what you did was *genuine*, that is productive and apt” (emphasis added). Whether or not the madman is real, his effect on the performance is. Tortsov continues: “But what led you to that point? One tiny word: *if*” (48, italics in original). In Tortsov’s logic, the question “what would you really do *if*” is meant to imbue the proceedings with the mark of

what is genuine, even as the fictional circumstance is explicitly framed as conditional, and so does not entirely require belief as such. In fact Tortsov's words, in places, mimic McGonigal's suspicion regarding "delusion": "I didn't ask you to have delusions. . . . And you, for your part, didn't force yourselves to accept my story about the madman as actual or real, but took it as a hypothesis. I didn't force you to believe in the truth of this fictitious madman, you yourself freely accepted the possibility that such a thing might exist in real life," however unexpected or unlikely (51). The performance is untethered to a sincere belief in the fictional circumstance, just as McGonigal suggests. The effects of this subjunctive "if," however, are given approbation by Stanislavski precisely for their realness.

The imaginary of a "Method" actor consumed by such a "for real" belief, to the extent that he is confused as to the boundaries of the theatrical fiction, is a popular one; acting, especially certain strains of psychorealism derived from Stanislavski, might be an earlier and much more recognizable potential "schizophrenia machine" than alternate reality gaming, one with a long history of being attended by arguably similar moral panics. While stories, which undoubtedly include many apocryphal ones, of actors "lost" in their fictional characters abound, the potential for them to legitimately confuse realities to the point of something like the "schizophrenia" warned by critics of ARG play is probably just as overstated. It is worth noting, though, that Stanislavski's writings, while not always consistent in their commitment to (or definition of) "real experiencing" or "truthful" stage behavior, repeatedly cite truth and realness over and over again not only as the guarantors of skillful stage acting, but as the *product* of it. The madman at the door remains a hypothesis, admittedly; Stanislavski/Tortsov does not expect actual belief of his students any more than Elan Lee expects actual credence from his gamers. What the "if"

*produces*, however, is, in both Stanislavski's perspective and his actual language, pointedly "genuine."

A closer look at Stanislavski's theories imply much more complex and sometimes inconsistent commitments to realness, some of which are discussed in previous chapters. Not least, the "mimetic frame" McGonigal cites as stable and forthright, seems much more permeable in Stanislavski's writings--consider his commitment to the expandable circle of attention discussed in the last chapter, which can contract close enough for the actor to "forget the fact that in the darkness, on every side, many strange eyes are watching you living" (99). While contradictions and paradoxes regarding realness, authenticity, and artificiality within Stanislavski's theories can be quite vexing, it is also possible to see those imperfect commitments as potentializing the kind of blurring of multiple realities that I assert alternate reality games produce. That is, if Stanislavski can see theatrical situation as "real" despite its fictionality or virtuality--rather like how he suggests that manipulation through indirect and conscious engineering can produce a "natural" response--the separation between those putative oppositions (real/virtual, manipulated/natural) must be quite unstable. Though Stanislavski himself warrants McGonigal's assertion that belief itself is not required of actors, even those working within a psychorealist tradition, freedom from granting actual credence in unlikely, impossible, or merely fictional circumstances does not do away with the special coincidence of the virtual and the actual, seriousness and play that marks theater and gaming alike--including the actual effects of unbelievable fictions. Tortsov's own students mark the physical effects of their excitement as they safeguard their apartment from the fictional madman in which they do not actually believe: "The instinct of self-preservation made us anticipate possible dangers . . . The women began to scream and ran into the next room. I [Grisha, the student character who

narrates the text] found myself under the table with a heavy bronze ashtray in my hand. . . I was in a state of high excitement” (47). The lunatic is not real, and no one is required to believe that he is. The excitement, though--along with the gender-appropriate screams and the weight of the weaponized paperweight--is actual, not unlike the changes effected by *World Without Oil*, of which McGonigal is rightly proud. Similarly actual, for better or worse, are the potential effects of living, for whatever period, within a mimetic frame: an actor, no less than an ARG-player, might be actually changed by having adopted a strategic presentation of affect, by the repeated adoption of fictional perspectives or the bodily enactment of even mimetic violence or cruelty--or mercy, for that matter, or joy. Some of the most pointed feminist criticism of Method acting points to effects like these as not only real but dangerous--and not dangerous in the rather far-fetched scenario of a schizophrenic break, but in the very plausible sense that acting as “if” one is damaged, weak, decorative or ancillary to life’s interesting action is likely to have adverse effects for female performers called upon again and again to impersonate the types of female characters so prevalent in the canon. Stage realities, including patently fictional dramatic circumstances, do not require belief to affect actors psychically or materially.

In McGonigal’s brief reference to Stanislavski, the knowing agency of the performer and the persistence of the “mimetic frame” are prioritized in a way that effectively dispenses with a very suspicious, if romantic, notion of the actor as some kind of tortured soul trapped in a confused simulation of reality, but at the expense of examining the possibility of and for a stage or game reality that *is* productively mixed, where boundaries do blur and the virtual mingles with the actual. In working against the perceived, exaggerated vulnerability of performers/gamers to naive confusion and even insanity, we should be careful not to eviscerate the considerable potency and potential of theatrical practice, of the subjective stance of the actors and gamers

under discussion here. The vulnerability of the players is also, figured in less frightening terms and from the opposite perspective, the power of the theatrical and virtual to permeate the real or ordinary. Vulnerability (to mental disorder, say) and potency (the potential to act, to change, to investigate and innovate) here are twinned properties, and denying one necessarily reduces the possibilities of the other. A *permeability* that can be discussed as other than inexplicable credulity, impossible naivete or the propensity for insanity can work as the other half of a powerful subjunctivity, of the recognizable potency of acting as-if.

Baudrillard warns of the supremacy of a hyper-reality that has already destroyed the real; in playing with reality--even in exposing it as something to be played with, modeling it as something subjective or contingent enough to exist multiply and partially--ARGs present it as fractured, perhaps unsatisfying or undependable, but also as a notion that can be powerfully leveraged. The performance of belief in a fictional, alternate or augmented reality provides the means for an *enacting* of reality: in acting as if an alternate reality were afoot, players are creating the potential for it through the actions of their play. They do not engage in simulation--exemplified, in Murray's consideration of immersion, by the holodeck--so much as a performativity through which the boundaries between actual and virtual are rendered/recognized as indistinct and undependable. It is through their knowing investiture in fictional circumstances, supported by actual artifacts, people and practices, that players enact reality. This is a powerful practice, even if the enacting is playful and the produced reality a hybrid one--both virtual and actual, real and illusory, playful yet significant. Those worried about the potential for "schizophrenia machines" like ARGs to trap players in alternate realities might have it wrong and right simultaneously: right to recognize the power of alternate reality experiences, but wrong as to why they fear it. The strength of the objections of uninitiated critics to this form of

play speaks to the important implications of this “performance of belief” in gaming (and theater, too), this enacting of mixed reality: the extent to which immersive fictions are “dangerous,” their power to blur realities and offer them up as less singular and solid than supposed, is also, differently framed, the seat of their power.



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