

Chapter 5



“Come On, Alice, Stop Acting!” Scriptedness and the Radical Method

Accounts of modernist and avant-garde performance rarely if ever include Method acting, which, for some of the reasons I explored in the previous chapter, artists and scholars have long considered to be opposed to the avant-garde unraveling of the “seams joining drama to script to theater to performance,” and aligned with the “illusionistic mimetic theater [that] is based on hiding the seams.”¹ This chapter argues the opposite. Even as it relied on plays and play scripts, Method acting took part in the modernist critique of the primacy of the dramatic text and developed strategies for overcoming its perceived inadequacies. This is more intuitively grasped when one considers Method acting’s impact on experimental film, where it directly inspired American experiments in improvisatory, actor-generated dialogue and direct cinema and *cinema vérité* aesthetics.² But if calling Stanislavsky a modernist may no longer raise eyebrows, calling American Method acting modernist contradicts a half-century of conventional wisdom, which has taught us that Method acting exemplifies the conservative aesthetics of the early Cold War period. For me, asserting that Method acting is modernist means that we can begin to look beyond these stereotypical formulations and see its overlap with such contemporaneous American late modernist phenomena as Jackson Pollock’s abstract expressionism, Anne Sexton’s confessional poetry, and John Cassavetes’s and Shirley Clarke’s independent films. This chapter will suggest one direction that such an analysis could take and will put forward one artist whose work demonstrates its efficacy, William Greaves.

This chapter also reverses a teleology that despite recent efforts, particularly those of Martin Harries, is still too often taken for granted—from theater to film—to explore what the media of film and television can tell us about the medium of drama. An analysis of the relationship between Method acting and drama must take into account its relation to film: its popularization through Kazan’s film directing, its relation to aesthetic

shifts in film production, and its cinematic iconography, as well as the abundance of film scholarship on Method acting, which has embraced it as an object of inquiry far more than theater studies has. Harries's insights into theater and media, and particularly into the ways that theater artists responded to the rise of film, are therefore highly suggestive for an analysis of Method acting, a practice that is at least partially defined by its crossing of medial boundaries.³ This chapter puts these two directions—Method acting's textual resistances and its relation to the rise of film as a performance medium—together. The crux I call "scriptedness," which refers not only to the dramatic text as such but to conventions, norms, and preordained behavioral and psychic structures to which authentic, immediate experience could be opposed, and was opposed, both in the overlapping discourses of the 1960s avant-garde and the New Left and by Method acting—with different results.

I conclude my argument about scriptedness with an analysis of William Greaves's fascinating, too-little-known 1968 experimental documentary *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*, one of an important group of American independent films that expanded the theories and practices of Method acting into a holistic aesthetics of the medium.⁴ In addition to his long career as a documentarian, which included seminal film and television documentaries about African diasporic and African American experience, Greaves was a longtime member of the Actors Studio who taught acting at the Lee Strasberg Theater Institute from 1969 to 1982 and shared the Studio's 1980 Eleanor Duse Award.⁵ Greaves's film pushes forward some of Method acting's most compelling elements, thematizing the resistance to scriptedness as both an aesthetic and a political problem and suggesting that Method acting might provide a unique way of dealing with it. Greaves's radical Method, on view in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*, is up to the task of negotiating the blurry boundaries between performance and its others.⁶

Where's Daddy?: Authenticity and Mediation

In William Inge's last Broadway play, *Where's Daddy?*, which premiered in 1966 in a Broadway production directed by Harold Clurman and starring Barbara Dana and Beau Bridges, Method acting is the subject of parody. Clurman had broken with Strasberg, his former friend and collaborator at the Group Theatre, years earlier, and Inge's play not only paints an ironic picture of the Method actor, but also articulates many of the cultural fault lines around which the Method's many controversies

gathered. In *Where's Daddy*, Tom, a young, struggling actor, and Teena, his nineteen-year-old pregnant wife, are paragons and parodies of their generation: they live like bohemians, in a squalid flat, across the hall from a young intellectual Negro couple; they are aggressively and self-consciously different from their “retrogressive” parents; and they are passionately devoted to psychoanalysis. When the play opens, they have decided to break up and to give their baby up for adoption, because they are too “emotionally immature” and need to “find themselves.” Teena seems ambivalent about this from the beginning, but for Tom, it’s not just a generational but a vocational imperative. As he puts it to his former guardian, a dandified professor evocatively named Pinky,

TOM: It’s like this. I feel I’m a very good actor. My teacher thinks so, too. He tells me he thinks I can have a very notable career in the theater after I . . . [sic] find myself . . . I have to be *true* to myself.

PINKY: That’s all part of that awful “method” you go around preaching, isn’t it?

TOM: (*Staunchly*.) It’s what I believe, Pinky.⁷

Devoted to the tenets of Method acting, Tom believes that he must “be *true*” to himself to be a good actor, while Pinky, in contrast, waxes nostalgic for a theatricality of self-transcendence: “In my day, actors played parts. They didn’t play themselves. They didn’t want to play themselves. They wanted to play the farthest thing from themselves they could find . . . You all think you have to be sordid to be real.”⁸ This is the image of the Method actor that has prevailed since the early days of the Actors Studio: the ripped T-shirt Brando-as-Stanley-Kowalski imitator, whose macho inarticulateness and emotional (and sometimes physical) nakedness demonstrate his authenticity.

Today we tend to read the imperative toward authenticity as either nativist chauvinism (what Aamir Mufti describes as “the impulse of authenticity towards the extermination of difference, on the one hand, and social self-destructiveness, on the other”)⁹ or naive individualism, easily dismantled by our sophisticated awareness of performativity, the constructedness of identity, and plural, intersectional selfhood. But in the 1950s and 1960s authenticity was a potent concept for Left intellectuals, as Martin Jay has argued, a trend epitomized by Marshall Berman’s *The Politics of Authenticity*, from 1970, which declared that “the idea of authenticity . . . articulated men’s deepest responses to the modern world and their most intense hopes for a new life in it.”¹⁰ Berman traces the desire for authenticity back to Rousseau and the Enlightenment, but Jay

reads its New Left valorization as a more nationally specific concept: “the culmination of the powerful impact on American culture of Sartrean existentialism, which reinforced native inclinations, stemming from certain strains of evangelical Protestantism and the frontier experience, to rely on individual responsibility to resist external conformist pressures.”¹¹ Jay’s description is consistent with many sketches of the “native inclinations” that produced Method acting, like that of David Krasner, who argues that the association of Method acting with gritty realism is “due in part to an emphasis on what in America counts as authenticity . . . [which] helped mediate the individual’s claim to a national sense of self.”¹² Jay’s reference to existentialism also links back to certain strains of Method acting, especially Kazan’s version, with its emphasis on individual choice and decision, and to the commonplace association of Method acting with existentialism as an intellectual fashion (the 1957 *Saturday Evening Post* article that did much to popularize a certain image of the Method actor confided that Actors Studio members “can discuss the theories of Existentialism readily”).¹³

As Jay notes, one important dissenting voice against the proauthenticity chorus of midcentury thought belonged to Theodor Adorno, whose *The Jargon of Authenticity*, published the same year Inge’s play was written (1964), is a scathing critique of the ideology of authenticity (and of existentialism more generally). Although it was written for a German audience, Adorno’s book is suggestive for an analysis of Method acting, not only because it sheds light on a critique that we now often take for granted, but also because of its repeated articulation of that critique in terms of performance and mediation. What Adorno calls out in the ethical jargon of German existentialism (in addition to its pseudo-religiosity, complicity with capital, and denial of history—all charges that have attended Method acting) is its promise of *immediacy*: its faith in experiences—“encounters,” “statements,” and so on—that escape or transcend mediation.¹⁴ As an eminent example of the jargon, Adorno cites a description of a TV program in which the author recounts with awe the experience of watching a preacher on television: “Thanks to the noble humane power of conviction that radiated out from him,” the authenticity-mad author writes, “not only did his words, which were testified to by his pictorial presence, become completely credible, but the listener totally forgot the mediating apparatus.”¹⁵ It presents itself as intimate, honest, the opposite of conformist, depersonalized mass communication: “The jargon pretends that, as a close-at-hand manner of communication, it is invulnerable to humanized mass communication—which is precisely what recommends it to everyone’s enthusiastic acceptance.”¹⁶

Jay asserts that Adorno found the basis for this critique in an essay he is better known for quarreling with, Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” which describes authenticity as “a function of reproduction, not a quality of what precedes it.”¹⁷ Indeed, Martin Harries has recently traced the debates in performance studies around theater’s “presence” to this subtle argument in Benjamin’s essay, that the presence and authenticity of the auratic art work is something that appears in retrospect.¹⁸ That authenticity as an ethical value rises to social and cultural prominence in the context of technological reproducibility as a nostalgically imagined presence (like aura) is suggestive for an analysis of Method acting, whose techniques were intended to produce authentic emotion and truthful behavior, and which gained ascendancy along with the rise of film and television.¹⁹

Where’s Daddy? lends credence to this interpretation, ironizing Tom’s authenticity fetish, his cleave to an imagined theater, and juxtaposing it to the actual ubiquity of television and film as the contemporary actor’s bread and butter. The curtain rises on Tom studying the script of a TV commercial, the only kind of acting job he can find:

TOM: “Gee, Coach, you’re not putting me on, are you?” (*Pause.*) “I’m beginning to think you’ve got something, Coach.”

TEENA: (*Interrupting.*) All your socks are washed.

TOM: (*Without looking up.*) I’m beginning to wonder why they turn away from me on the dance floor, Coach.

TEENA: You’ll probably have to do them yourself after you leave. It’s really very simple. Just remember to get one of those new hard-water soaps on the market. One brand’s as good as another. Just put a tablespoonful in a sinkful of water and let them soak for three minutes.

TOM: Sounds like another commercial.²⁰

Teena’s practical domestic instructions sound to Tom “like another commercial,” a sign of canned, pre-scripted domestic conventionality that he must resist. To counter it, Tom imagines an authentic theater in which he would reveal his true self: as Teena explains to her mother, “With commercials, it’s different. They’re not important. But Tom is very particular about the type of part he does in a play, and the type of director he works with.”²¹ A 1949 letter to Elia Kazan from more than thirty members of the Actors Studio in response to a *New York Times* editorial he published decrying the loss of New York theater buildings to radio and film confirms

that even over a decade earlier, Method actors shared Tom's perspective on the moral difference between the media: "We share with you a feeling of alarm," they wrote to Kazan, "at the oppressive drive toward thought-controlled conformity. The 'nightmarish' unemployment situation among theatre workers is growing with the swallowing up of theatres by radio and television." "Thought-controlled conformity" is conflated with the "swallowing up" of theater by mass media, which is totally opposed to real theater and real civic culture: "We agree completely that the preservation of the theatre is a 'civic matter' and believe that this would be a happier country with less B-36s and more culture."²²

What *Where's Daddy?* also demonstrates, however, is that Method acting's ethic of authenticity should be considered not only a reaction to the new media of film and television—the work of acting in the age of mechanical reproduction—but also to its adversarial relationship with acting's original mediation: the dramatic text. If authentic theater stands against technological reproducibility, what happens to the reproducible script? In this first scene, the "kitchen sink" realist drama is deauthenticated and debased by its contact with television: Inge's play suggests that the scriptedness of the dramatic script comes into focus as such after the commercial scripts of film and television have made scriptedness itself seem like a problem. In *Where's Daddy?*, the problem is the multiplication and contagion of the television script, which infects the script of the domestic scene: when Teena's lines about soap and Tom's lines about deodorant ring similar, scriptedness is suddenly everywhere. Inge even includes a corresponding jab at his frenemy Tennessee Williams, when Teena's mother refers to a particularly violent scene from *Suddenly Last Summer* as a scene from a Disney movie.²³ The performer's authenticity is not only a nostalgic construction after film, but a construction, in some sense, after text—after the texts of modernist drama shifted the focus of theater away from the work of the actor toward the work of the playwright. The Method actor's authenticity was not only a consolation after reproducible media destroyed the actor's aura; it was also a consolation for the loss of the position of the actor as the primary artist of the theater.

As I argued in my introduction, Method acting's relationship to text was conflicted: on the one hand, the Actors Studio, which described itself as dedicated to "the union of actor and playwright," remained focused on plays over and against the tide of avant-garde theater, and both Strasberg's own writings and the tape-recorded Studio sessions abound with dramaturgical commentary. On the other, Strasberg is famous for declaring that the words are secondary to the character's emotional journey.²⁴

Nor was this ambivalence unique to Strasberg: it had already been articulated in Elia Kazan’s speech on the occasion of the Studio’s founding in 1947. Describing his contemporaneous work directing Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Kazan recounts how he came to realize how a scene in the play, in which the leading man is called from a fight with his wife and her sister to a telephone call about his bowling team, should be interpreted. What appeared as a dramatic fracture (“even an irrelevancy”) could be made whole with the right reading, intimately associated with the right performance:

[The interruption] had to be read entirely as part of the scene with the women—and with direct dramatic reference to it. The import of the speech was not in the writing, but in Acting.

Did you ever try to tell this to a radio actor. And after having received his polite and earnest assent (Radio actors are always, always polite) did you ever try to get it out of him? . . . “Chum, its not [*sic*] in the reading.”²⁵

“It’s not in the reading”—but it *is* in the reading: in how the scene “had to be read.” The “Acting” that is the import of the scene is a form of textual interpretation, “a little examination.” Kazan can’t “get it out” of the too-polite radio actor, who fails to understand what the director means, because he and his mediating apparatus are too “polite” to capture the Acting epitomized later in this passage by Marlon Brando, trained to know his own impolite presence and use it to be impolite with the text, reading decision where there could only be “interruption,” reading the violence in a seeming “irrelevancy.” The impolite character and the impolite actor merge in a theatrical unveiling of the scene’s unconscious aggression.

On the surface, this anecdote might seem an uncomplicated explanation of Stanislavskian through-line, connecting two seemingly unrelated dramatic incidents with a unified logic of character. Instead of “interruption,” “irrelevancy,” there is psycho-logic: this sounds like Stanislavsky’s *Creating a Role*, which begins with a section on how to study and analyze a play and emphasizes the importance of mapping the inner logic of each part through a series of units and objectives, conscious and unconscious, small and large.²⁶ This is not just a unified interpretation, however, but an overcoming of a prior break: the break of the telephone call that interrupts the domestic scene. This intrusion of the outside is a verbal, not a physical action: the problem of the scene is that the telephone call is just words, independent of narrative significance. The actor’s job is to

overcome this break of disembodied language introduced by the disembodied communication of the telephone. Of course the radio actor can't do it: what's important is the physical presence that is impolite, authentic, decisive, violent—and unmediated. Moreover, on this scene, the intrusion of mediating words (words of the medium, words as the medium) must be conquered by the imposition of a more powerful presence by being combined with it. The machine, the telephone, collaborates with the Acting, which becomes visible in and through its mediation.²⁷

Kazan's anecdote, while ostensibly articulating the power of the actor's assertion, instead offers technological mediation a kind of détente: the mediating apparatus (here the telephone, but one inevitably imagines Brando in the film version of *Streetcar*, his body overwhelming the screen) can stay as long as the acting ("Acting") is more powerful. Kazan's description thus aligns Method acting with the Benjaminian film actor, who fights the filmic apparatus and wins, modeling for the modern viewer how to prevail over the encroaching machination of work and life.²⁸ However, here it is not that the actor's labor compensates for the loss wrought by technology; rather, his labor, figured here as a piercing psychic and physical aggression, is what makes the technological interruption, and the scene itself, meaningful.

Where's Daddy? comes to us from the other side of this compensatory optimism: the actor, here, has no power to overcome the mediating apparatus's incursion, and all efforts to do so appear arrogant and naive. As Inge makes clear, whatever his intentions, Tom can't escape scriptedness: after all, his name itself, Tom Keen, was taken from a book (he picked it "from some books I read at the orphanage"), as well as quoted, or replicated, in the name of the deodorant brand he sells, Keenclean. Here again, the television commercial is put on the same plane as literature, as two faces of the scriptedness no one can evade. But if this pervasive mediation feels like a problem to Tom, it certainly does not to Pinky, who loves *I Love Lucy* as much as Milton. The play sides with Pinky: choose a decent script (whether it's Milton or Lucille Ball) and you'll be fine. For obviously Tom's halting self-knowledge is scripted too: he leans obsessively on psychoanalytic jargon, unable to figure out what to say without it. In *Where's Daddy?*, there's nothing between or beyond the lines but silence. Toward the end of the play, signaling the seeds of his newfound maturity, Tom reads from a different kind of script: Razz, his neighbor, "sick of playing the angry black" (a stereotype no less canned for being contemporary), has picked up *Othello* (another "angry black," of course), and Tom prompts him as he delivers Othello's description of his success in wooing Desdemona with his rhetorical talents. (Of course,

Tom is also literally a script: Inge’s.) And one of Pinky’s last lines, as Tom finally comes home for good, is a quotation: “Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.” It’s the final line from an A. E. Housman poem—and the title of a 1962 episode of the TV show *Route 66*.

Lest we conclude, however, that *Where’s Daddy?* comes to rest in an abandonment of essentialism and a celebration of citationality and high-low cultural *mélange*, let us not forget the fundamental conservatism of the play’s vision: making Tom a daddy, whether he likes it or not, is its *raison d’être*. The play may side with Pinky and Razz, but only after they have been shooed off the stage to allow Tom, Teena, and their baby to take their proper spotlight as the white American nuclear family of the future. Pinky’s homosexuality may exempt him personally from that particular social responsibility, but the play still requires him to fight for its perpetuation. After all, Tom wanted to return to Pinky’s protection and, Inge obliquely suggests, his former life as a rent boy (how exactly Pinky picked Tom off the street at age fifteen is left to the imagination—if it needs to be). And though the play mocks Tom’s self-analysis of his own emotional immaturity, and the false guidance of Method acting and psychoanalysis, maturation and personal guidance toward greater self-knowledge are what the play itself gives Tom: in the end, he realizes his true love for Teena and takes on his “authentic” role as father.

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm and the Radical Method

It starts like a normal film. A woman in a floral dress runs down the stairs under a footbridge in a park, pursued by a man in a suit calling her name, “Alice! Alice! Wait a minute!” He catches up with her and grabs her arm. “Just how stupid do you think I am?” the woman asks. But something is off: the sound quality is poor and her voice is shrill, and in the background, ambient static hasn’t been filtered out. More: the woman is stiff, her attention is unfocused, she waits one second too long before responding. Her affects seem forced, and incompetently forced at that: a faint smile plays on her lips at one point, erroneously, and when she furrows her brow it seems almost mechanical. Though her lines imply that she wants desperately to be left alone, she hangs around with no seeming desire to move. “Come on, Alice, stop acting!” the man says, and when she turns around (“Don’t touch me!”), we are suddenly looking at a close-up of another man’s face, delivering the lines we have just heard: “Come on, Alice, stop acting.” The screen splits: on the right, the second man’s face; on the left, the face of a second woman, delivering the same

lines as the first, but with a totally different intonation. She is crying and almost shaking, as the camera pulls in tightly around her mouth. The content becomes clearer: they are a couple, and the woman is confronting the man with her knowledge of “him, yes, him—some little faggot boy that half the world knows about.” Just as this turn has been revealed, the scene cuts again: this time it’s a full shot of a third woman’s face, older than the other two. The dialogue becomes increasingly histrionic: “Believe in me.” “Believe in you, how the hell can I believe in you, you’ve been killing my babies one after another!” As the scene goes on, we return to the split-screen, except this time both actors are in both shots, which show them from different angles.

The same park, the same script, but different actors—the same setup, the same circumstances, but different faces, different affects, different interpretations. “Come on Alice, stop acting,” the man repeats; “how much of a phony can you be,” one of the women shoots back—but it’s clear that they are acting, that they are being phony, if to different degrees and with different effects. None of it is “convincing”; we can’t “believe” in either the man or the woman—these are failed performances. As the third scene progresses, the “script” gets more arbitrary and more ridiculous, feeling less and less scripted, and more like the actors are making it up as they go along, with pseudo-psychological jargon: “Do you know what you’re doing, that you keep, you keep saying these things to me, alright, about faggot, you’re projecting, Alice, because you’re trying to see in me things you see in yourself!” We hear a strange noise—the whine of audio equipment feeding back. Then, as the actors reach their climax (“Fuck you!”), the scene cuts to a shot of a neatly dressed older white woman and a shirtless young white man watching a film crew, around whom the camera pans. They are encircling a black man in a green mesh shirt, who is listening with headphones to the equipment’s whine. “That’s dreadful. This is terrible. Is that what we’ve been getting all the time? That’s dreadful!” Jazz drumming cuts in, providing, with the whine, the soundtrack, as the title sequence begins.²⁹

William Greaves’s groundbreaking work of experimental cinema, *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*, shot in 1968 and amended with a second installment in 2003, defies categorization. Though the film is a documentary, its subject is a fictional pretext that is also a pretext about fiction: a fictional film that Greaves told his crew they were producing in New York’s Central Park, while simultaneously turning the cameras back on them and shooting the shoot itself. The film alternates between a fictional drama, which Greaves calls “Over the Cliff,” filmed with different pairs of actors but mostly with Patricia Ree Gilbert and Actors Studio mainstay

Don Fellows; the crew’s disorganized efforts to film it; many disparate images and scenes of bystanders in the park, some of whom watch quietly, some of whom intrude, and some of whom pay no attention and apparently do not know they are being filmed; and, most compellingly, a secret meeting the crew had without Greaves. The larger film, which centers around the crew’s anxious rebellion from Greaves and his chaotic direction, draws parallels between the fictional film shoot and the political crises of its era, as the surrounding realities of the shoot continually intrude on the frame, finally overtaking it entirely in the agitated political aria of a Central Park denizen who spontaneously approaches the set. In *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*, the controlled fiction is overtaken by its uncontrollable context. But in contrast to what one might expect—that the artificial script of “Over the Cliff” is meant to throw into relief the authenticity of Greaves’s documentary—Greaves in fact challenges those very distinctions, between the unscripted and the scripted, reality and performance, authenticity and mediation.³⁰

The inadequacy of the script becomes an issue early on in the film, in the crew’s first secret meeting, in which they discuss the film and complain about Greaves’s direction. What first appears to be a rebellion from the mandated hierarchy of the film shoot is almost immediately revealed to be something else:

CREW MEMBER (JONATHAN GORDON): We were sitting around the other night and we, in talking, a few of us we realized that here is an open-ended film, with no plot that we can see, with no end that we can see, and an action that we can’t follow. We’re all intelligent people, the obvious thing is to fill in the blanks, to create for each of our own selves a film that we understand, and if we try to think about the reasoning of the director for allowing us the opportunity to do this, giving us the circumstances that enable us to be able to sit here, we can only conclude, at least we did last night, that he wanted it like this.³¹

The meeting, supposedly spontaneous, subversive, a break from the scripted, is, instead, a setup: part of the director’s plan, part of the grand design of the film. Their conspiracy against authority is in fact a capitulation to it. Gordon’s instinct was right: Greaves did want them to challenge his authority—and, clearly, he chose to include their meeting in his final cut of the film. As he reported later, he wanted to see how long it would take them to rebel from his incompetent direction: “The question was, ‘when will they revolt?’ When would they question the validity, the wisdom of doing the scene in the first place?”³² Greaves saw this

as a metaphor for politics: how absurd do the rules have to be before people revolt against them? The absurdity here is not only Greaves's halting uncertainty and sometimes outright incompetence as a director (or rather, his pretended incompetence, in his role as director), but also that of the scripted scene itself, with which the film began. However, this first glimpse at the crew's secret meeting also immediately rebukes the notion that there will be easy ways to escape the scripted, no matter how hollow, how bankrupt, it has become.

As the crew quickly articulates, the written scene of "Over the Cliff" is analogous to the roles scripted for men and women by society: predetermined, banal, pathetic, and no longer convincing. That the scene is poorly written makes its inadequacy all the more obvious:

CREW MEMBER (BOB ROSEN): It's not like Edward Albee. I mean Edward Albee writes *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and George and Martha are superdramatic people given lines that are brilliant lines . . . This is bad writing. This script is not good writing . . .

VOICE (*off-camera*): On the other hand, human life isn't necessarily well written, you know.

CREW MEMBER (JONATHAN GORDON): That's the whole point. Here we're confronted with one of the ultimate banalities of life. A pair of actors says this ultimate banality. Bill has given them these lines to say in the first place and um, tells them how to say it, um, and the actors try to find the meaning in it. Now I see it this way. I see every American man at some time in his life saying these lines at some time to every American woman . . . It's almost as if these lines were planted in their head when they were born.

Rosen cites Albee, and not Mike Nichols, the director of the film version of Albee's play: Albee's writing is the point. Serious drama, with "brilliant lines," appears, as theater did in *Where's Daddy?*, as an idealized counter to the triteness of the present script. This very banality points to its intractability in the national psyche: the lines "planted" in the heads of American women and men—scriptedness is no longer "brilliant lines" for "super-dramatic people," it is "one of the ultimate banalities of life." Following this script is not just a sign of what we now call normativity, and what in the 1960s was called conformity, but of uniformity: a nightmare of nonindividuation. Uniformity, not conformity—actually being the same, not just acting the same—is what Abigail Cheever has argued was the real nightmare behind the midcentury imperative toward authenticity.³³

That the narrative content of “Over the Cliff” is so similar to the content of *Where’s Daddy?* is telling: in both, a man seeks to escape the responsibility of a wife and child; in both, that escape is represented as an escape toward or into homosexuality (as the commonplace homophobia of mid-century psychology would have it, a sign of immaturity). Moreover, in both, homosexuality is the instigator of debased, feminized theatricality—phoniness and histrionics, in “Over the Cliff,” and camp, in *Where’s Daddy?*—while authentic theater is an unreachable masculine ideal of honesty and truth. In *Where’s Daddy?*, Tom must learn to reject both his dream of an authentic theater and the homosexual escape represented by Pinky and to accept his normative social role (father), which is structural and therefore cannot be false, no matter how he feels about it. *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One* takes a different view, ironizing Inge’s conclusion: there is no “happy” resolution to the canned conjugal drama; there are also no children (“you’ve been killing my babies one after another!”) to reify the structural continuity of the narrative and release the characters from the burden of charting new paths. (Interestingly, in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, there is also emphatically no child, just the fictional, fantasized son George and Martha have made up, whom George cruelly “kills” during the play.) Instead, there’s “no end we can see, and an action we can’t follow”—the roles that were once part of a coherent whole, a meaningful narrative, no longer make sense—and neither Alice nor Freddie can “stop acting,” either in the internal fiction of the scene or in the film itself. Their roles don’t work, but they’re stuck inside them.

This is why it’s so important to dismantle the script they’ve been given:

GORDON: You haven’t been here for eight days and listened to this sordid, horrible conversation over and over and over again—with black faces, white faces, tall ones, old ones, young ones, skinny ones. You know? Convincing ones, unconvincing ones.

GREAVES: All right, all right, all right, so what else can we do? We’ve got all this equipment lying around here . . . It would be interesting—it really would be, Jonathan, it would be very interesting to see you surface with a better script . . . a better script as a screen test for a pair of actors.

GORDON: The way to make the script better is to, first of all, drop the euphemisms. You talk real language . . . Freddie has a cock, Alice has a cunt, Freddie likes or doesn’t like to fuck Alice . . . That’s the way to talk, and that’s the way people, uh, can liberate themselves to talk about themselves, about what they really feel.

Are these really the only alternatives: the tired old script of “Over the Cliff,” or “Freddie has a cock, Alice has a cunt”? Is that really the language that will liberate us?³⁴ Gordon’s version of the script suggests a slangy (and simplistic) version of Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*, that bible of the New Left, an alignment that also may explain some of Gordon and the other crew members’ ambivalence around performance. In *Eros and Civilization*, performance denotes the inauthentic: the “performance principle,” what Marcuse understands to be the contemporary version of the Freudian reality principle, represses the libido by sublimating it to socially useful, capitalistic behavior: “Libido is diverted for socially useful performances in which the individual works for himself only in so far as he works for the apparatus.”³⁵ Performance is something you do for others in order to make them and yourself believe in it; performance presents an inauthentic self that supports the status quo. “Stop acting” is not just an interpersonal weapon: it’s a political one.

But Greaves’s film doesn’t draw the same conclusions as Gordon—or perhaps it picks up where he leaves off. In the same conversation, Greaves responds to Gordon’s challenge, and directly links the problem of the script to politics:

GREAVES: The screen test proves to be unsatisfactory from the standpoint of the actors and the director and what happens is that the directors and the actor undertake to improvise something better than that which has been written in the screen test. This sort of palace revolt which is taking place is not dissimilar to the sort of revolution that’s taking place, let’s say, in America today. For instance, I represent the establishment, and I’ve been trying to get you to do certain things which you’ve become in a sense disenchanted with.³⁶

Although Greaves in later years denied that his race had anything to do with his relationship with the crew, it is an unavoidable part of the film: the white crew members’ relative unwillingness to directly criticize him contrasted with the blunt verdict of a vocal black crew member, “He doesn’t know how to direct,” seems partly a result of their unwillingness to see him as “the establishment.” As film scholars Charles Musser and Adam Knee see it, Greaves was subverting “demeaning stereotypes of black ineptitude that haunt American cinema.”³⁷ In another sense, Greaves’s role is an acting job in and of itself: how does he need to behave to be seen as other than his prescribed role as a member of a marginalized minority? Can his performance surmount their habits of mind? And if not, if these habits are actually “planted in their minds when they’re born,” what good is a new script?

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One suggests that Method acting might actually be equipped to deal with these problems, first because it acknowledges that they are problems: Method acting recognizes the impossibility of getting outside the scriptedness that it must nonetheless wrestle with, as well as the impossibility of fulfilling the command “Stop acting,” and has developed techniques to deal with it. Rather than stabilize the authority of script and delimit the boundaries of characterization, rather than throw the script away and resort to Gordon’s absurd example of plain speech, Method acting acknowledges the crisis of scriptedness: the crisis of the script’s suddenly apparent, apparently incontrovertible, inadequacy. Its efforts to find the unscripted in the scripted—Rosen at one point refers to the moment “where you pass beyond that line of manipulation”—may not ultimately be successful (despite trying to “improvise something better,” despite singing their lines as they do later, and despite using their own experiences, we never see the actors really nail the scene). But they are not naive, as they appear in Inge’s play.

Greaves cites both Strasberg and Stanislavsky in his notes for *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, two of a motley list of influences that includes jazz, J. L. Moreno’s psychodrama, Eisenstein’s film theory, the second law of thermodynamics, Arthur Bentley’s *An Inquiry into Inquiries*, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, and Aurobindo on mysticism, before “Strasberg on acting,” and “Stanislavsky on theater and acting.”³⁸ This list is worth examining for several reasons: first, because it disrupts the context in which Method acting is usually placed, even the context in which I have placed it in this book. Instead of, say, Freud, HUAC, and Tennessee Williams—“the 1950s”—Greaves situates Method acting firmly within the ethos of “the 1960s”: the avant-garde, empirical uncertainty, radical sociology, Eastern mysticism.

Second, the ideas on the list suggest a unique interpretation of Method acting that shifts its valences in surprising directions.³⁹ I have proposed that Greaves understood the acting theories of Stanislavsky and Strasberg to hold in tension the artificial and the real, the conventional and the—possibly mythical—impulses, affects, and emotional expressions that are outside convention, and many of the ideas on the list are similarly characterized by a tension between the structured and the unstructured: the melody and improvisation of jazz, Sri Aurobindo’s material structuring of divine force.⁴⁰ Greaves’s two hard science references, the second law of thermodynamics and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, add a further wrinkle. The Uncertainty Principle—observation changes what is being observed—poses an implicit challenge to the absorptive model of realist performance: a “private moment” can never be the same if an audience

is watching, and an actor's absorption is never complete. The Heisenberg principle poses a very different model for actor-audience relations than that posited by "fourth wall" naturalistic performance. Meanwhile, I read Greaves's interest in the second law of thermodynamics, which asserts the priority of entropy (and which also inspired Thomas Pynchon's contemporaneous *The Crying of Lot 49*), as a challenge to Diderot's model of acting, in which the actor's control, mental and physical, always has more power than her spontaneous sentiment—a model which, as Joseph Roach and others have argued, Stanislavsky maintained. Greaves shifts Stanislavsky and Strasberg's theories in a specific direction, away from closure, control, autonomy, and identity, and toward the spontaneous, the dynamic, and the relational.

Not identity, in other words, but identification: Greaves, the only artist in this book to write directly about Method acting and identification, understood it as an agonistic process, fraught with conflict and excitement: "Part of this strength, along with the excitement and challenge of this project, is *its basic conflict*, which is that of identification . . . identification of the actor with the part, the characters with each other, the actors with the crew, the crew with the script, with the actors, with the director, etc." (emphasis and ellipsis in original).⁴¹ Identification, for Greaves, is multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory; identification necessarily creates conflict. This is not the identification with racialized national norms that Baldwin and Genet deplored; it is closer to the disordered sexual identification of *Suddenly Last Summer*, but with a different thrust. Identification in this description is both psychic and political, a tactic of performance (the actor with the part), interpersonal psychology (the characters with each other), and group cohesion (the actors with the crew, the crew with the actors and the director), that overlaps, corresponds, or doesn't. Identification both separates and brings together, throwing groups and individuals into conflict, with each other and with themselves.

The title of Greaves's film comes from a term coined by the social theorist Arthur Bentley, who used the terms "symbiotaxis" and "symbiotaxiplasm" to describe the heterogeneous organisms, human and nonhuman, material, affective, and epistemological, that make up the world as we know it. In Bentley's writing, "symbiotaxis" takes the place of the binary of "individual" and "society," which he thinks inadequate to represent the intricate interweaving of bodies and behaviors that characterize *symbios*, life-together.⁴² As a hermeneutic for Greaves's film, this compelling strain of Bentley's thought suggests that *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One* proposes something other than what Eve Sedgwick, referring to Foucault, calls "the ruses of the repressive hypothesis," the

unacknowledged persistence of the categories of repression and freedom, if often renamed as “hegemony” and “subversion,” or, in this context, scriptedness and authenticity.⁴³ By inserting “psycho” in the middle of Bentley’s term, Greaves makes his nondualism explicit: this is not about psychology as an individual, closed system, but about its intertwinement with the social, the experiential, the material. The actors, the crew, their habits, their psyches, their histories, their impulses: the *symbiopsychotaxiplasm* is a writhing mass of conflicts, identifications, actors, audiences, as heterogeneous and chaotic as Central Park itself. What’s exciting—what’s erotic (as Greaves remarks early on, perhaps teasing, perhaps not, sexuality is the real subject of the film)—is the way that these elements rub up against each other, the *symbio* (the life-together) with the *psycho*, the psycho with the *taxis* (the order, the arrangement), the taxis with the *plasm* (the material).

Mediation, in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, is not an obstacle: it’s a collaboration between disparate materials, working together to make something new. Nothing is purely immediate, purely spontaneous, but some things are new, are different, and that’s exciting. Greaves’s production notes articulate this excitement alongside his nonbinary thinking about scriptedness and unscriptedness: “Shoot a scene where they do a line reading. Have them improvise and ‘put clothes on’ the dialogue, which is naked . . . the kind of ‘clothing’ civilized people use to cover their psyches. Then let the dialogue as written explode.”⁴⁴ This instruction implies the opposite of what the crew later complains: that the dialogue is pure convention and meaningless “euphemism,” not “real language.”⁴⁵ For Greaves, the dialogue is blank, naked: as he later explained, despite what was intended to be poor writing, “the actors will suddenly take hold and sometimes have a moment of truth, which takes what is purportedly bad writing and moves it to another level.”⁴⁶ For Greaves, nakedness and truth are not the same thing; truth is the explosion of the written, its shards not destroyed but reorganized, moved “to another level.” This is the point of all those Method exercises—not to strip away convention but to “explode” it.

It is fitting, then, that what is finally asserted in the film is a truth not *beyond* theatricality but in and with it. The film’s final moments are devoted not to the crew’s rebellion, which never really comes, nor to Gordon’s “blunt” version of the script, nor even to the actors’ rather ham-fisted attempts to feel something, but to the beautiful monologue of a homeless man who approaches the shoot. We meet him just after we’ve watched the actors trying to sing their lines, in an ambiguous parody of an Actors Studio exercise (Bob Rosen teases Greaves, “Is this what you do at the

Actors Studio?”). Greaves has just inquired, faux-innocently, whether the crew agrees that the singing might add some nice “texture” to the film, to which one of the quieter, disgruntled crew members growls, “There’s no sense of reality.” Suddenly there’s a new voice in the background: “What is this thing? . . . oh it’s a movie? So who’s moving whom?” The camera pans across the park to where a small group of crew members has gathered around a man in a white shirt with his shoes slung over his shoulder. With dandyish intonation, with flamboyant gestures, Victor Vikowski (as he calls himself) makes everything that has come before him look canned:

VICTOR: Merci beaucoup. Oh, you ain’t got a cigarette?

GREAVES: Merci beaucoup, that’s French, isn’t it?

VICTOR: No, it’s Jewish. Yeah, Jewish. Jewish, darling, very Jewish.

Victor’s quick-witted answer to Greaves’s condescension, claiming “*merci beaucoup*” for Jewishness, voices, with his camp delivery (prefiguring his later description of his sex life), the implicit semiotic chain linking abjection, homelessness, cosmopolitanism, Jewishness, and homosexuality.⁴⁷ As in Joseph Litvak’s theory of “comicosmopolitanism,” Victor is indeed “a happy pervert”: instead of affirming the authority and priority of the film set over his home, the park, he disrupts the seriousness of that Art with comic mimesis: “Oh, what is this ABC *camera*?”⁴⁸ Victor is an artist too—as he tells the crew, he’s a painter of watercolors—and his speechifying makes us wonder what scripts *they’ve* been following. Kicked out of his residential hotel for not paying his rent, Victor has been living in the park for the last nine weeks, but when Greaves tries to cast him as a philosopher of the park, he blanches: he’s a graduate of Columbia University and studied architecture at Parsons School of Design. Despite this high culture past, Victor paints himself as an exemplary noncitizen, not hiding anything behind his educated vocabulary: “I made a drunk of myself there, but that’s all right, at least it cleared my mind a little bit, because I hate bullshit, you know”; “I’m an alcoholic, by the way, too, you know; well, I am! I admit it, you know.” Victor sees no need to dissemble, nor to explain his apparent contradictions.

Victor also delivers the only explicitly political speech in the film:

VICTOR: We need changes. We all need money, true, but when you have to live off someone else’s fucking back to make that buck, that’s a penis of a dollar . . . When I see the Negroes and the Puerto Ricans and the whites pushing the wagons—I made a canvas just using blank-faced mannequins—because they manipulate

the business form. I know that scene, he’s a big fat belly with a cigar smoking, you know, sitting back and “Ha ha!” Playing his horses and fucking a Puerto Rican or a colored girl in the back! I’ve seen the scenes, baby.⁴⁹

He speaks with passion and conviction, but Victor is also clearly enjoying himself: acting out the “big belly with a cigar smoking,” and delighting in his own elocution. He is far from Gordon’s liberation from euphemism: “Freddie has a cock, Alice has a cunt.” Instead, he makes use of “scenes”: the downtrodden pushing wagons, the fat cat smoking a cigar. His speech would not be nearly as compelling were he not such a good performer, with bouts of stage-setting and character description. Victor renders the distinction between scripted and unscripted irrelevant. “This is what I call it,” he repeats, “I coined that phrase”; he’s not only written his own script, he’s invented his own language. Is he making it all up? Is he “for real”? Does it matter? “I’ve seen the scenes, baby”: for Victor, what is “seen” is “scene,” and there’s no other way of seeing.

In stark contrast to the roving camera of the rest of the film, the camera moves only slightly throughout this scene, which also seems unedited. It is almost as if a short stage play were suddenly dropped in the middle of an Eisenstein-influenced documentary. This is not to say that it appears unmediated: Victor is very aware he’s being watched. At one point the crew asks him to sign a paper giving them permission to film him, and he tells them his name is “so long you better have a paper long enough. Wait, I’ve just started—and I eliminated the middle part”—and Victor’s enormous, expanding signature, more powerful without visual representation (how long could it be? what *is* it?), fills the off-screen imaginary. Victor’s theatricality disrupts the binary of authenticity and mediation, just as Victor himself quickly dispenses with the puritanical homophobia of “Over the Cliff.” He might well stand in for what is productive about theatrical performance in the wake of the apparatus: the homeless performer, mobile, unpredictable, polymorphously perverse, sneaks in where he doesn’t belong and changes things. Not presence, but nimbleness; not authenticity, but mutability.

One of Greaves’s most powerful techniques in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One* is repetition: the repetition of the written dialogue, the repetitive structure of the shoot, the repeated return to the crew meetings. The revolutionary potential of repetition as a subversion of standard thinking about time is perhaps what interested Greaves about Aurobindo’s mysticism; it is also a feature of Strasberg’s ideas about performance. In both his writings and his lectures at the Actors Studio, Strasberg insists

(repeatedly) that the problem of acting is the problem of repetition: not doing a scene well, but doing it well over and over again. The problem, but also the opportunity: without that problem of repetition there would be no Method acting to help mitigate it, and no *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*. Repetition in Greaves's film recalls the messianic temporality of revolutionary change imagined by Walter Benjamin: throughout *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take One*, there is always the sense that with the next pair of actors, in the next take, everything will be different, the "dialogue will *explode*," change will occur.⁵⁰ Greaves's film as a whole has this quality of messianic readiness, as the crew, too, remains on the cusp of revolution. Victor is ready as well: when the crew at last bids him goodbye, he says, "I never like to say goodbye, I like to say 'so long.'" A few seconds later, he amends it: "Ciao! I never say goodbye, I like to say 'ciao.'" As he and the crew walk off together, a dull static roar rises as the camera pans over the trees, and then we return to a familiar scene: Greaves talking to two actors, two different actors. At the end of the credits, the new actress, Audrey Henningham, who is black, claps, to sync the sound; the same audio whine we heard in the beginning rises, and the screen closes in on her face with the title card "Coming Soon: *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm Take Two*." Next time it might be different.