



Working Paper No. 12/2013

UCL Anthropology Working Papers Series

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**‘WHY DOES THE METHOD SEEM SO
CONFUSING?’
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF
SUCCESS, SELFHOOD, AND CAPITALISM IN
WOODBIDGE, NEW JERSEY, AND AT THE
LEE STRASBERG THEATRE AND FILM
INSTITUTE, NEW YORK**

Dissertation submitted in 2011 for the MRes Anthropology

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'Why Does The Method Seem So Confusing?'

**An Ethnographic Exploration of Success, Selfhood, and Capitalism in Woodbridge,
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Abstract

This paper suggests that Capitalism can be understood as a process of essentialisation/individuation enacted by individuals through their habituated behaviour, and that this formulation has a peculiar fractal quality that is both 'structured and structuring' – in the process of its enactment it transforms/abstends the objects into processes of essentialisation/individuation – and refuses abstraction when scaled. Conversely this makes a methodology that is dependent *upon* scaling inappropriate because it rests upon a metaphysic of holism that cannot be applied to fractal processes. The paper therefore attempts a fractal methodological approach, positioning, side-by-side, two ethnographic vignettes, one concerning small-town life in Woodbridge, New Jersey, and the other concerning The Strasberg Institute and the approach to acting known as The Method. The paper argues that as Capitalism-as-process is enacted, its inherent contradiction – of attempting to achieve value without materiality/labour – is also reproduced, which, when manifested in the ethnographic objects, makes them confusing and contradictory also: the objects *becoming/being* abstensions of Capitalism. The paper also argues 'success' is ultimately a function of visibly performing one's own self-determination, with a conceptualisation of self that is (itself), essentialised to, and counter-invented as, desire given subjectivity.

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Author's Note

In the following work all names and some personal details have been changed to protect the anonymity of those with whom I worked.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the support of Martin Holbraad as Supervisor for this paper and the support and care given to me by the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute.

In particular I wish to thank Cooper who not only helped me enormously with his insight, honesty and friendship. I have tried to honour The Method as he showed it to me.

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'Why Does The Method Seem So Confusing?'

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Prologue: taken from my fieldnotes – Thursday 16 June 2011. Late.

"A Hatful of Rain was interesting – it felt like a press-night; a small audience; 'old school': all quite proper with big announcement, "Welcome to The Strasberg Institute". I sat out the way. I had seen **J___** earlier – who had taken time off school to go to Las Vegas! The individual is king in America – he can go to Las Vegas if he wants!"

Introduction: a methodology of fractals

If infinity goes both ways, both outward and inward, so that the scales that would purport to limit it end up acting as its conduits, then the very distinctions between plurality and singularity, whole and part, complexity and simplicity, as well as infinity and finitude lose their sense. And this because the basic assumption upon which each of these distinctions rests, namely that the world is made up of an infinite multiplicity of 'things', which may or may not relate to each other, vanishes also. If of every thing one can ask not only to what other things it relates (the pluralist notion of comparison) but also of what other things it is composed, then the very metaphysic of 'many things' emerges as incoherent. Everything one would conclude is both more and less than itself. 'More' because what looks like a thing in the pluralist metaphysic turns out, postplurally, to be composed of further things – infinitely inward – and 'less' because at the same time it too contributes to the composition of further things, infinitely outward.

Holbraad and Pedersen (2009: 371-394)

I present here two ethnographic vignettes: one brief, outlining the logistics of my fieldwork (so what I *set out to do*, and then actually *did*, in overarching terms), that serves as context for the paper, and that is primarily focused around the small town of Woodbridge, New Jersey – where I was staying – and around my land-lady Claudia; and the other longer, about my experiences at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute. This second vignette initially (seems to) consist(s) of one moment of one class for which I was in attendance, broken down, beat by beat – itself an homage to, and model of, this paper's concerns – and, enfolded within each beat, is further ethnographic material and discussion of (most broadly): success, selfhood, and its relationship to a particular (peculiar?) approach to acting known as The Method. The second vignette folds in on itself but in so doing actually 'expands inward', Tardis-like, in an act of "abstension", following Holbraad's and Pedersen's (2009) use of the term (cf. the Delusian notion of *intensive* abstraction e.g. De Landa 2002, Viveiros de Castro 2009), in response to the strategies of comparison utilised by Strathern (1988, 1992, 1999, 2004), whereby 'more' is revealed as 'we cut away'.¹ I first address methodologically, here, why this structure is appropriate to best describe and reflect upon my time in the field: why it is I go from

¹ Most accurately, following Holbraad and Pedersen, what is revealed is what 'more' *becomes* when we try to engage from a metaphysic of post-plurality (cf. Strathern *ibid.* Gell, 1999), as I attempt to do.

vignette (1), small, and ostensibly *disconnected* from vignette (2) – disconnected in terms of a post-modern multi-sited approach to fieldwork i.e. creating a *network* of linked ‘nodes’ which becomes the ethnographic ‘object’² (cf. Marcus 1993, 1995, Marcus and Fischer 1986): rather I suggest its *disconnection*, the non-applicability of connection, is *the point* – to vignette (2) which travels in the opposite ‘direction’, scoping outward as we go ‘into it’. And the answer to why this is the most appropriate methodological (re)contextualisation of my material (‘re’, because it is happening in the function of the writing) is that it became apparent during my fieldwork that the *ultimate* object of my study was, against all my intentions, *Capitalism*, and not as I had hoped more explicitly, (only) acting, performance, narrative, and the theatre in New York (which must, instead, be enfolded ‘into’ and conversely also enfolds[?] Capitalism). And Capitalism as I was experiencing it – as a *series of enacted processes* – is fractal and anti-holistic in character; “partial” in Strathern’s 1992 sense: fractally reproducing itself *in practice* through every aspect of my fieldwork. With Capitalism-as-object however unexpected, the metaphysic that would have allowed me to scale from the ‘local’ to ‘global’, which anthropology has traditionally utilised (cf. Eriksen 1995, Kearney 1995, Appadurai 1996, Dilley 1999), looking through the ‘small scale to the large issue’, or “how global facts take local form” (Appadurai 1996: 18), cannot apply as it depends upon a conceptual base of holism, which, here, is un-attributable, precisely due to the character of the object: i.e. due to its fractality. A different conceptual topography is required that doesn’t ‘enable’ a ‘big’ (holistic) context/‘small’ content, because there is no ‘big’/‘small’; only transversions/abstensions of scale. I argue what I experienced in Woodbridge *is fractally the same* as what as I experienced at The Strasberg Institute *is the same* as what my informants were experiencing in their attempts to be ‘successful’ actors (which was the initial hook to my inquiry) *is the same* as The Method *is the same* as the conceptualisation of selfhood and work/labour of those actors

² So a theoretical two-dimensional visual plane, where ‘nodes’ can be ‘joined together’ as on a map:

“Just as this mode investigates and ethnographically constructs aspects of the life worlds of various situated objects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests amongst many sites” (Marcus 1995:96).

Note in this modelling there remains a metaphysic of holism: ethnography still takes place in a bounded, albeit theoretical location (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1992; and, for critique, Strathern 1999: 161-78)

and teachers *in* The Method, which actually makes up the bulk of my ethnographic concerns in this paper. Rather than saying it is *through* these concerns that we see Capitalism (global, holistic, totalising) impacting upon the ‘local’, my argument *is that, fractally, these concerns actually are Capitalism*, scaled transversely, rather than vertically/hierarchically (i.e. as parts into a (w)hole, from a metaphysic of post-modern plurality and ‘globalisation’): one into the other, ad infinitum. And therefore, in this context, I argue Capitalism is *a process of fractal essentialisation and individuation* in every social(/political/economic), indeed, *every* (one of my) ‘ethnographic’, encounter(s), whereby all behaviours – perhaps even all *conceptualisations* including the notions of ‘success’ and ‘self’ – are distilled into ultimate ‘pure’ forms of themselves: *all are fractal transversions/abstensions* of each other, realised/enabled in practice through the embodied actions of individuals, rather than through the agency of a conceptual ‘whole’ which autonomously *is* Capitalism (perhaps also ‘The Market’ in Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” sense). So the desire to have a manicured garden but not to care about the town’s shared roads, to have *money*, to be ‘real’ as an actor, to be *visible as a self which-is-the most-you*, to be *successful* – these are all the same: fractals of fractals of *essentialisation*, in which, ultimately, ‘value’, is separated entirely (or perhaps not?..) from materiality (cf. Marx 1977, Hegel 1952, Tronti 1980, Hardt 1995³) despite the inherent conceptual contradiction that this seems to entail, and which is, I argue, deeply embedded *in* Capitalism. Hence success as an actor might not actually depend upon craft at all – i.e. upon its materiality – but upon strategies to be ‘successful’, which then act to accrue further success, and further value (material, and otherwise). Arguably ‘success’ as an actor depends, then, on success as a Capitalist – as would, in principle at least, ‘success’ at any endeavour.

In a way the material that I choose to engage with is, therefore, conceptually interchangeable. In this paper I primarily engage with notions of selfhood and success, as

³ “In this light the real subsumption appears as the completion of capital’s project and the fulfilment of its longstanding dream – to present itself as separate from labour...labour becomes invisible in the system.” (Hardt 1935: 39)

they relate to, and via, “Method Acting” / The Method. But theoretically we would see the same formulations/mechanisms of fractal essentialisation/individuation as enacted by individuals – and concomitantly the same inherent contradiction of (attempting) to separate value from labour – if we were engaging explicitly with any aspect of Capitalist American life, because I argue *this process* is ‘truly’ what Capitalism *is*. As I intimated above, this was by no means the intended object of my study, so in some respects the deeper complexities of Western Capitalism will remain necessarily unexplored: this is a jumping-off point, therefore, for further study. At this stage it is enough to say that through what I talk about when I am *not* talking Capitalism, what I’m really talking about *is* Capitalism.

In concluding this opening gambit, I posit that the surtitle to this work has an obvious answer, the principle of which Marilyn Strathern alluded to when I was an undergraduate (attempting to allay fears about non-apprehension of Levi-Strauss): The Method seems so confusing *because it has become confusing*. And I argue the reason it has become confusing, both to me and to some of my informants (who ‘should’ know), is because it too has necessarily ‘undergone’ Capitalism – *it has been capitalised* (maybe it should be METHOD) – and has *become Capitalism*; fractal in its character. As Bourdieu (1977) argued of *habitus*, (and as Foucault might agree with regard to its discursive effects), Capitalism is both ‘structured and structuring’ *towards* fractality: it contains its own transformative/abstensive, fractal momentum as it is reproduced/reproduces itself; or most accurately, as *people* reproduce it. Finally as Derrida (1988, 1981) argued, it is the nature of ‘writing’ – from which Derrida extrapolated to *all experience*⁴ – that content determines its own *form*; hence (an attempt at) fractal modelling *in the writing* becomes methodologically necessary. So my structure of disconnected, fractal, ‘confused’, vignettes.

⁴ A function of writing’s capacity to be grafted onto “other chains of meaning” (1988:7), with neither subjective author, nor receiver.

Vignette (1): Claudia

“A man can’t buy back his life when his life is finished.” – Big Daddy in *Cat on A Hot Tin Roof*

Tennessee Williams

This vignette also serves as context. I went to New York City to conduct six weeks of fieldwork – May 21st - July 1st 2011 – in and around the theatre industry there, but primarily at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute, on East 15th Street and Union Square in Lower Manhattan. The Institute, or ‘Strasberg’, or simply ‘school’, as it was referred to – the colloquialism not being irrelevant, as I shall discuss – is a drama school for professional/would-be professional actors, which broadly teaches the craft of acting based upon the work of Lee Strasberg (1901-1982). The mechanic/minutiae of what this actually means (and its relationship to ideas of selfhood, success and ultimately Capitalism) takes up a good deal of this paper. At this stage it is enough to say that Lee Strasberg pioneered what has become known as “The Method”, or “Method Acting”, in America, following a tradition developed by Constantin Stanislavski at the Moscow Arts Theatre (MAT) at the turn of the twentieth century, and which was first seen in America in 1923 when MAT toured from Russia – Strasberg seeing those productions. Popularly, Method Acting is known through the successes of some of its proponents in American Cinema – James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Steve McQueen, Robert De Niro, Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Angelina Jolie – and through a *perceived* (often inaccurate) commitment to ‘living a role’ beyond the requirements of performance. My relationship to The Institute stems from connections through my professional theatre career in the UK: it was through them that the Institute agreed to me conducting research there.⁵

⁵ My fieldwork might be considered auto-anthropology (cf. Strathern 1987) in that I was ‘at home’ through my expertise in professional theatre, and my literacy in the training undertaken at Strasberg; although I was arguably much less literate than it might seem, due to the particularity of The Method, which occupies this paper’s concerns. I find it useful, nevertheless, to cite Strathern’s argument that ‘home-or-not’ status depends not upon location/‘expertise-as-location’, but on “the relationship between (anthropologists’) techniques of organising knowledge and how people organise it themselves” (Strathern 1987: 31). She argues, that all anthropology is effectively auto-anthropology because it depends upon a conceptual logos of culture/society (which is fundamentally, in the terms of anthropologists’ engagement, a product of anthropological discourse) and is ultimately concerned with *that* – a process of invention (cf. Wagner 1981) – rather than with the objectification of a conceptual ‘other’: hence expertise/home‘ness’ does not ‘matter’ provided the disciplinary nature of knowledge production/invention is privileged as the ‘true’ object, over comparative objectification.

The initial hook to my inquiry was (theoretically) asking ‘how actors in America understood/imagined notions of success (and/or a successful career), in the theatre’ (and implicitly, but far more prominently, in film, as I would discover). For I had an idea – developing arguments made by Macintyre 1981, Fischer 1984, Bruner J 1987, Ricoeur 1978, 1981, 1985, on the narrativization of lived experience/the emergence of a narrative paradigm – that success might be understood in narrative terms: that actors (and implicitly everybody else) might perceive a conceptual narrative structure to their lives in which they were the ‘heroes of their own stories’; and that they might reconstitute and *adjust* their behaviours to fit narrative tropes, overcoming (seeming to?) obstacles to ‘make it’, whatever that might mean.⁶ Life mimicking art mimicking life. Furthermore, I felt that a prevalence towards the experience of narrativity might be becoming more likely because of increasing visibility of narratives – of *success* (hero overcomes obstacle), but also archetypal narrative structures – in the public consciousness; broadly, in the context of my fieldwork, the American Dream itself, and *particularly*, the narratives of films (theatre to some extent, though less so) and television (as part of a shift towards the hyper-real/pre-eminence-of-the-image, synechocic of narrative⁷, that Baudrillard 1983, 1994, purports) which the actors with whom I was working, aspired to ‘make’ (and through making, make themselves, *as narrative selves*⁸). Hence I felt there might be a meta-operation going on: actors working *through* narratives, adjusting their behaviour to fit narrative tropes, and so *perceiving/reconstituting* their lives-as-lived as narrative experiences, thereby inculcating the assumption – and implicitly *the achievement* – of success, because that is what the narrative trope demands happens (whether or not it actually does). And I wanted to see

⁶ cf. Turner (1990) social life can assume narrative shape, dialectically related to ritual form. My premise is that narrative shape might transverse/abstend fractally ‘through’ an holistic conceptualisation of social life; to the *individual* and his/her actions.

⁷ I offer the conception of the image as a narrative ‘out of time’, or as pre-expressive narrative, drawing upon Ricoeur’s arguments 1981 1985 (cf. Heidegger 1962, Ricoeur 1978, 1985, Mink 1972) that each fragment of narrative contains the possibility of *every other part*; a consequence of its pre-expressive character, whereby its end is already pre-conceived by its beginning (1981:178).

⁸ cf. Kleinmann 1988, on the construction-of-self through illness narratives, and Ochs and Capps 1996 on the (generic) narrative construction of self.

how the training at Strasberg fitted into this: where ostensibly actors are developing material skills necessary for 'living truthfully in the imaginary circumstances of a narrative' (be that a play, film etc) – i.e. learning acting craft – and (perhaps) in so doing, are also contributing to the building of the narrative of a successful life. Using 'narrative' skills, *narratively*, to construct a narrative of success. And I felt that, because of the attention to narrative intrinsic to being/training-to-be an actor, if a process of 'emergent' narrativisation (cf. Mattingly 2000) was observable/phenomenologically available, it would be clearest *amongst actors*, even if my suspicion was that it was true more widely.

So this is what *I thought I was exploring*, and I was: going to Strasberg each day, talking to actors and teachers, watching them work in classes, participating myself. But somehow, in the fieldwork process, that intellectual trajectory shifted slightly – I would now suggest *abstended* – and what I was becoming concerned with was a notion of how selfhood was (being?) essentialised/*individuated* in, and *through*, what I was seeing, and that success and value were somehow most closely related to *that/(a)* process of essentialisation: if narrativisation 'fit', therefore, it too, was, in some way, *also* a function of essentialisation. And essentialisation wasn't just visible at Strasberg: it seemed to penetrate everywhere.

Although I was working each day in Manhattan, I lived over the Hudson River, in Woodbridge, New Jersey. I was renting a small apartment under the house of an elderly Jewish woman – Claudia – who had become a friend of my grandmother when she had visited the UK twenty years before. Everyday I would commute into Manhattan on the train – about a forty-minute journey – and although I was 'out' most of the time, Claudia and I spent a good deal of time together: indeed I felt a degree of responsibility for her. Her husband had died a couple of years previously, after a long and happy marriage, and she was lonely: if I could be somebody to talk to then I would. And the thing that Claudia

wanted to talk most about was *money*, and its fractious effect upon her new relationship with Simon, her equally elderly boyfriend from Long Island.⁹

Simon, she would tell me most days, was obsessed with money and it was causing problems – so much so that in my near two-month stay, she ‘ended’ things twice (helpfully renewing the relationship in time for a trip to Berlin). She told me she and her husband had never accumulated money (she had been a teacher; he had run a small business) and they hadn’t placed social value upon it: any money made, they’d spent travelling during school vacations. In contrast, Simon (whilst not wealthy, exactly) was adamant that money was *important*. ‘How did you make a *living* out of what you do?’ was virtually the first thing he asked me. I was never sure whether he had been referring to my academic, or my theatrical work – probably both. He wanted to make sure he paid for his share of *everything* – something that Claudia felt (*I* would surmise, in a Mausean fashion) was anti-social – and would regularly talk about what he earned, and what he had saved (not, significantly, what he *spent*). One idiosyncrasy that would rile Claudia was Simon’s insistence upon travelling from Long Island all the way to Jersey to buy petrol, because it was a few cents/gallon cheaper: a ploy of which he was particularly proud. Claudia often said he only visited her to fill up the car.

For Claudia money was there to be spent. Consequently, although she did not have a lot, she was very generous to me, and her plethora of friends. More than once she took me out for dinner, and paid for us to go to the cinema one Sunday afternoon. But she was also uneasy about money. It made her uncomfortable: she worried that she did not have enough, and would keep a collection of coupons ever-handy, in case there was an opportunity to get some small discount on any store-purchase – a habit she tried to impose upon me. She would ask me about my earnings, both through my university funding, and also my professional theatre work – she was a regular at the theatre in NYC

⁹ The very fact that Claudia referred to Simon as her boyfriend – he was in his 70s – is, retrospectively indicative of a process of essentialisation towards success that I observed. Success here is structurally equivalent to youthfulness, so an essentialisation towards success involves a minimisation of age; hence to be successful, Claudia must have a *boyfriend*, rather than a gentleman-friend, or companion.

– and she particularly worried about how her grand-daughter, Sian, who had dropped out of college (“temporarily”) to pursue a career as an artist, was going to ‘be successful’ and ‘earn enough’. Indeed, Claudia had discouraged her own daughter (Sian’s aunt) away from a career in the theatre for fear about how she was going to ‘be successful’. And yet even though that daughter now makes “a good living” in the city, Claudia is *still* concerned, and often told me, with pride, that her daughter did, in fact, “have a theatre-major”.

In Simon’s behaviour I think what we see is that ‘success’ has been essentialised entirely to money, and in so doing, the materiality of success – that which in Marx’s terms is the material basis for value; its labour – is no longer visible (to him) at all. *Money is, in this respect, the ultimate manifestation of essentialisation* (cf. Weber 2003 [1958], Simmel 1978, Bloch and Parry 1989, Hardt 1995, Turner 1999, Low 2005) – and therefore the obvious fetish of a Capitalism-which-is-essentialisation¹⁰ – because it is entirely abstracted from materiality other than its own; and through/with it, as Hardt argues, following Marx, “labour is incorporated not as an external but as an internal force, proper to capitalism itself” (Hardt 1995:38): i.e. materiality seems to exist abstractly *within* money/capital because it *seems to have* the capacity to generate further capital without effort – a “capacity to yield value without human input” (ibid:39), and “to grow and expand of its own accord” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 7)¹¹. Simon sees himself and others (including me) as successful only as a function of how much money they have: indeed, Simon’s attempts to get cheap petrol are actually re-conceived by him as an example of *earning* money, and therefore, in his terms, becoming more successful. I argue that what has happened, is that he has incorporated money into his own conception of a successful

¹⁰Low (2005) citing Turner (1999) draws the parallel between Marx and Simmel, concerning the abstension/fetishisation of money as Capitalism’s iconic ‘object’: “Just as Marx treated religion as the fantastic representation of human alienation, so Simmel regarded money as the reified representation of impersonal Capitalism (Turner 1999:152).” (Low 2005: 38)

¹¹ cf. Strange 1986, Harvey 1989, Tomasic and Pentony 1991: on “casino capitalism”.

self¹² – a conception which is *already* a meta-product of the essentialisation of what a conceptualisation of self even *is* (– an essentialisation that is, I postulate, the action of a fractal Capitalism in-process, enacted by individuals' habituated behaviour).

Following Wagner (1981, 1995) I argue Simon's conception of self is one who *can* consume¹³ (who has the capacity to act as a consumer) and yet, ironically does not actually prioritise the act of *consumption* (he does not actually spend money); but rather prioritises the *means* to consume: the act of consuming(/spending) actually reduces the potential for future consumption, and so is detrimental in terms of achieving/maintaining a successful self; hence he doesn't do it. Simon is a self-as-consumer *in potentia* – in abstraction – therefore; which makes sense if you accept that the process of essentialisation – of which his conceptualisation of self is theoretically a product – is so self-purporting (i.e. it contains its own progressive momentum towards efficiency/rationalisation in Weber's sense) that it *no longer requires* the materiality of actually consuming anything: to consume is inefficient, and is jettisoned in favour of simply accruing money.

There may be, ultimately, a double irony that the process of essentialisation-of-self (that I discuss in greater detail in the second vignette, as observable through the Capitalisation of The Method) here occurs with Simon through his incorporation of/the *consumption* of *money* – already the abstraction of essentialisation – *into* his self: *it is essentialisation via an essentialisation* therefore, to produce a non-consuming consumer. And it is important to note that this 'double-process' has happened through Simon's *actions*, as opposed to through an holistic notion of Capitalism that is, itself, the 'agent'. It is *Simon* who is hoarding money; who is driving across the state; who withhold his consumption (cf.

¹² A fuller exploration of the 'successful self' occurs in Vignette Two.

¹³ cf. Sennet 1974, Campbell 1987, Friedman 1991, on consumption forming identity.

Friedman 1991¹⁴). If Capitalism as a process of essentialisation is visible, it is in the habituated, 'structured and structuring' behaviour of individuals, who are acting (complicity) to essentialise and – I postulate – also to *individuate*, themselves; because it is these processes that *are* Capitalism, hence its capacity for fractal reproduction, 'simply' through the re-iterative (non)-consumptive behaviour of 'lots of Simons' (cf. Appadurai, 1996: 66-67).¹⁵

In contrast, Claudia strikes me as a bit of a contradiction. She felt strongly that 'you can't take your money with you' but she *also* saw money as the measure of success, whilst, simultaneously, not wanting to *participate in* money; perhaps because by limiting her participation she believed she limited her exposure to being judged as successful/unsuccessful: i.e. I argue she had not incorporated money into her conception of self to the same extent, and so in a way she was not as essentialised, as Capitalised, as Simon, whose conception of self had taken on this double, or re-iterated/meta, capacity, described above. (This comparatively weaker notion of Capitalisation makes sense in other aspects of Claudia's life: she was a fierce Democrat, and regularly had heated early-morning email debates with her Republican relatives about the need to pay more tax.)

But Claudia was still subject to, and was a(n) (unwilling) propagator of, Capitalisation (i.e. the habituated enactment of Capitalism-as-process): she had enough *real* material demands on her resources that she could not avoid money, hence ironically her obsession with talking about it. And I argue the contradictions – worrying about money but

¹⁴ Friedman writes: "Even anti-consumptionism is a consumption of sorts, as an appropriation of a part of the world in an act of creating a life space and style of existence" (1991:158) i.e. in an act of 'self-making' the 'positive choice' not to incorporate/realise the self through consumption is still an attempt to anchor identity; which Friedman argues, following Campbell 1987, is a necessary 'self directed strategy' of the free-floating individual subject in the face of an existential concern that nothing, including selfhood, is authentic, but is the outcome of "an arrangement of man made products, thus an artifice." (ibid:158)

¹⁵ Appadurai argues the reason for consumptive behaviour's re-iterative, repetitive character, is that "consumption, in all social contexts, is centred around what Marcel Mauss called "the techniques of the body" (Mauss 1973) and the body calls for disciplines that are repetitious, or at least periodic" (Appadurai 1996:68): i.e. because all consumptive acts are symbolically or physically rooted in a logos of being-in-the-world as a body (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962), consumptive practices are subject to the discipline of the body, and become *embodied* – and so habituated – through discursive practice, in a Foucauldian sense.

not wanting to participate in it; supporting the arts but not wanting her grand-daughter to be an artist; being generous but obsessively saving coupons; wanting the material security of being with Simon without exposure to his essentialised behaviour – are all structural transformations of the inherent contradiction in Capitalism; of achieving the value of labour without labour itself, that which Comaroff and Comaroff call, the “reali(sation) of the dream of medieval alchemy” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:7): a point to which we shall return.

Transformations of that same contradiction were visible in Woodbridge too. A small, lower-middle-class town in North New Jersey, my experience was of the train-station, the fifteen-minute walk to Claudia’s house and my apartment, The Reo Diner, (famous for its Republican associations, and as a Bon Jovi hang-out, Woodbridge being Richie Sambora territory), a Dunkin’ Donuts (famous essentially for coffee), the main street with a minimal selection of shops, and a nearby mall, resplendent with touch-sensitive simulated electronic water-pool that rippled out entertainingly as you walked ‘through it’ into the building.

The town had been badly hit by recession. A lot of the shops were shut, or boarded up; and the roads and paths were poorly maintained: potholes in the tarmac, and little care taken over the pavements. It was just worn, and very quiet. But the houses were immaculate. They were not luxurious, or even particularly big by American standards, but they were fantastically well maintained. They were all detached: space, in the sense of crowding the neighbouring plot, was not a concern. Primarily wooden (brick was not local and so extremely expensive) and painted pastels of blue and green, or simply white, the houses had manicured lawns, and mostly the white picket fence and flagpole – Stars and Stripes flying above, or attached to a tree in the garden. What was so striking was the disparity: between the individual homes, and the town’s shared areas – the streets. Money and labour were clearly evident with the former, but not the latter. It seemed so contradictory: people were clearly very proud of their homes – I saw the same man cutting

the same lawn every single day – but they seemed not to recognise that the appearance was ‘marred’ by the poor state of the ‘collective’ surroundings. Money was obviously being spent, but it was *within* the boundary of the property. When I raised this with Claudia she laughed and said that even if people had the money to contribute to civic upkeep – which she was certain they didn’t – nobody would pay the extra taxes it would necessitate: “You gotta understand, people just don’t want to pay tax”. Whilst I am sure this is true to an extent, New Jersey tax rates are *low*, even compared to the rest of USA (there is no sales tax on clothes or petrol). I think what was going on was that people’s conceptions of what ‘mattered’ – of what was even ‘conceptualisable’ as *mattering* – had been essentialised to *individuals* and their private property, which had been incorporated into their individual identities through consumption, and away from a conception of ‘society’ that was anything other than a collection of individuals, acting to individuate themselves: individuation being, ultimately the essentialisation of a conceptualisation of personhood/self¹⁶. Comaroff and Comaroff are relevant here, so I quote in full:

The contours of “society” blur, its organic solidarity disperses. Out of its shadows emerges a more radically individuated sense of personhood, or a subject built up of traits set against a universal backdrop of likeness and difference. In its place, to invert the old Durkheimian telos, arise collectivities on a form of mechanical solidarity in which *me* is generalised into *we*. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 15)

And the notion of ‘collectivities’ seems false in my context: I did not see anything collective happening – just individuals, “mes” operating ‘next to’ each other and in their practices becoming more and more essentialised, fractally reproducing their own increasing individuation; hence *of course* people were not worried about the state of the streets, the pavements, anything ‘civic’: it had nothing to do with them, and it wasn’t incorporated into their senses of self. Why would you want to pay tax to contribute towards the upkeep of something that was for a different ‘me’, that wasn’t ‘you’? In contrast, people’s homes,

¹⁶ which, as I argue in Vignette Two, might nevertheless retain a metaphysic of post-plurality, albeit, internally rather than externally (cf. Strathern 1992, Pedersen, *forthcoming*): individuation, then, through the construction of an ‘uber-you’, made up of the internal relations between *wants given subjectivity* (Wagner 1995) abtending ‘into your self’.

their gardens – those things that are consumed ‘into’ their identities, are obviously maintained to the highest level, because, their (individual) identities are paramount: conceptually they are *all* that exist to them. Following Hardt (1995), I argue Woodbridge was (beginning to operate) in a “post civil condition” (Hardt 1995:40), where the discipline – in a Foucauldian sense – that ‘is required’ to maintain collectivity is being ‘essentialised away’.¹⁷ And this is what I ultimately want to draw from this vignette: that essentialisation/individuation penetrates right through social life via the actions of individuals. This is what Capitalism *is*, and you see it in Claudia’s and Simon’s relationship to money, to each other, and to me; and in how Woodbridge is/isn’t maintained. And there is no notion of scale here: it is no more or less complex on the ‘level’ of the town, as ‘compared’ to the ‘level’ of Simon’s decision to drive across the New York State to buy petrol. They are *the same*: abstensions of each other. This is why, methodologically, I can ‘jump’ from this vignette to the next, which develops this notion of essentialisation/individuation – in relation to selfhood in particular, begun here – as I tried to understand what I experienced at the Strasberg Institute: because it is all the *same thing*. And I argue The Method proves to be the exemplar – albeit necessarily confusingly, and contradictorily, so.

¹⁷ Hardt usefully cites Foucault from an interview in 1978 (1994): “In the last few years society has changed and individuals have changed too; they are more and more diverse, different, and independent. There are ever more categories of people who are not compelled by discipline, so that we are obliged to imagine the development of a society without discipline.” (Hardt 1995: 41)

Vignette (2): The Strasberg Institute

“Look look! These are going to be the greatest actors in America!” – A mother to her child, walking past the entrance to the Strasberg Institute, as students take a break outside.

I had been a regular presence in Cooper’s classes for three weeks, and I had a routine. I would wait outside the rehearsal studio on the third floor, even though some students were already inside; then as I heard Cooper turning the corner I would step in, Cooper seeming to tailgate in behind, thereby enabling me to ride his authority into the room. I had already realised this was completely unnecessary – the students, all of whom had been at Strasberg¹⁸ a variable length of time, though most no less than a term, were generally disinterested in me, and the classes regularly had guests: students trying out a different teacher¹⁹; friends; or interested parties, like me. I had known Cooper – a charismatic and imposing man in middle-age – for a number of years as the former teacher of a friend, and it quickly became clear that it would be through him – his classes and his friendship – that I would gain access to how acting is taught at Strasberg, and to the encyclopaedic history of American acting that he carried round in his head.

Retrospectively, it was also through him that I was able to (attempt to) engage with how The Method seemed to model this fractal process of essentialisation that I thought I was seeing.

The studio was large; a cross between a classroom and a theatre, with a stage-area under lights and covered in furniture: beds, chairs, mats, tables, a stand-alone sink the acquisition of which was a source of much pride for Cooper – “I just took it at the end of (the recent production of) *A Hatful of Rain* – they were just going to throw it away!” – and

¹⁸ Strasberg the man was normally referred to, simply, as “Lee”, suggesting a familiarity that was telling with regard to how students and teachers perceived themselves in relation to the narrative of The Method and Lee Strasberg himself.

¹⁹ Note it is the teacher who is being, in a sense, judged, therefore; a manifestation of precisely the essentialist, consumerist mode that I am seeking to draw out. Cf. Shore and Wright 2000 for parallels of essentialisation as a result of audit strategies in education in the UK; and Power 1996.

then facing the stage, rows of built-in folding chairs where students seated themselves, set up like an audience. I sat in the front row, avoiding the broken chair that had been my nemesis some days prior, and Cooper sat down on a single chair in the corner; not part of the block of seats, but at ninety degrees to them – separate, but only just, and commanding the best view of both stage and audience.

The class usually consisted of individually accomplished exercises followed by individual or group improvised studies called *études*,²⁰ all preceded by Cooper – with his paraphernalia spread about him, notebooks, pens, coffee – asking: “so, any questions”?

On this day, however, what followed was unusual – the sort of event that I had been waiting for and for which, on the advice of my supervisor, I had been positioning myself where I thought ‘the shit might hit the fan’. Cooper’s opening question-and-answer session, which, until now, had always seemed to be used to cover the belated entrance of stragglers, today erupted into an emotionally charged encounter between teacher and students. As one question piled into the next, students’ frustrations – both personal and professional, concerning the sophistication and complexity of what they were being challenged to grasp – came together and the class was permanently diverted. And underlying the entire encounter was a deep fear and frustration: *essentially people were uncertain about what The Method actually was.*

Thus the three-hour class contained no on-stage work, nor any practical endeavour; and yet it became the intellectual crux of my time at Strasberg. In fact, that question became metonymic for my entire experience in America: I felt, intuitively, that the confusion around The Method was the same as my confusion around *everything*, and if I solved one, I solved the other. And, during the class, there was one exchange in particular – one

²⁰ The detail of these exercises and *études* is examined in some detail subsequently. Now it is enough to say, simply, that this is what I would normally expect the class to consist of.

scenic ‘event’²¹ – that contained ‘within’ itself the seeds of everything else: fractally expanding inward, right ‘through’ the concerns of this paper; never reaching them exactly (for to do so would negate the conceptual point), but precisely abtending them in a methodological illustration of the fractal character of the ‘object’ (which is, ultimately, and retrospectively, the essentialising/individuating character of Capitalism).

This ‘event’ is, therefore, the jumping-off point for this Vignette: increasingly, as seems to be the case, and fittingly so – *in media res*. I describe the ‘event’ initially as a passage of text, and then in the form of a script, in which I have emboldened particularly significant parts²². I subsequently break down the ‘event’ beat-by-beat (the Stanislavskian term for the smallest part of *action*) enfolding further ethnography as required, in an attempt at methodological abstension. Much of what is discussed seems to be contradictory, but it is precisely those contradictions that are significant in revealing the ‘object’; that are, I argue, in fact, structural transformations/abstentions of the inherent contradiction of Capitalism discussed in Vignette (1).

A student, maybe twenty years old, Cleo, asked whether she must abandon what she had learned about Michael Chekhov – “his techniques”²³ – in order to “do Method”. Cooper was wary when students implied The Method could be ‘done’ – as though it were a finite task, as opposed to something more systemic and ‘infinite’ in its character (though the reason(s) for multiple understandings is significant as I shall show). Cooper said that Chekhov was already trained in Stanislavski’s System – which has become *understood* as

²¹ I use ‘event’ here knowingly, for as well as its prosaic meaning, ‘event’ is used in the Stanislavskian tradition (and by Strasberg) to refer to an occurrence that causes *every* character’s intention (what they want to achieve) to change. An actor therefore often marks the ‘events’ in a play as moments from which they undertake a different ‘action’ (active pursuit of intention) until the next event. The period between events – referred to as the ‘unit’ – can be further broken down, beat-by-beat (as I show), as different attempts to pursue an intention are made.

²² It feels appropriate to adopt the format of a play-script, given the subject material. As is customary for a play-script a ‘/’ indicates interruption. I subsequently adopt the script format for other ethnographic material throughout the paper, when it is appropriate.

²³ Michael Chekhov, nephew to Anton, was a student of Stanislavski who developed an ‘external’ approach to character (and performance) through what he termed the ‘psycho-physical’: the connection between imagination and the physical body. It can result in a more explicitly ‘theatrical’ aesthetic; ‘performed’ with a conscious acknowledgement of the theatrical frame (cf. Goffman 1974) as opposed to the ‘naturalism’ commonly associated with The Method.

The Method in America – and that his ‘technique’ was the consequence of his grounding in The System’s principles. It was not, itself, systemic; but a particular, essentially aesthetic, choice. In contrast:

COOPER

The Method is about being creative organically: to enter another world and live out its existence. It gives you the tools to make up that creativity. The essential psychological trick is 'If' - it unlocks images of possibility in the imagination.

CLEO

But if it's imagination, then it's not real. We're just making it up. I thought we weren't supposed to use 'imagination'. I can't imagine! My imagination does not work!

COOPER

You have to bring it back to affective memory; it's *affective*; people always take it too literally and forget 'affective'. Your imagination is a delivery system; it works, but perhaps there is no content there yet. And if it truly doesn't work, perhaps you just can't take the note.

CLEO

(agitated)

What do you mean by that?

COOPER

Perhaps you just can't take the note - if it's not there, it's not there.

CLEO

You can't say that. You don't know me! /

COOPER

You guys do not have actors' concentration. You want the solution. You've got to relax so deeply that the unconscious bubbles into the conscious. But in the Twenty-First Century, you are literally fighting the gods. It's so overwhelming; the sex, the money, the power. Everybody buys into it and it sucks you in - but we passed work in the Twentieth Century. No one does it anymore. Acting is like ditch-digging. It's not being a movie-star. It's work! When I was your age I had *this* level of energy, *this* level of concentration every day. I am not bullshitting. People do not understand this. With Sensory²⁴, it starts out with sympathetic feeling, and then becomes something more acute, **but you have to work at it. I see you guys waving your arms around - that's not it! **Maybe you cannot note this, if you do not have the imaginative capacity, no matter how much you wish it. I could wish to be the greatest opera singer in the world, but if the talent's not there, it means shit!** At the moment you 'feel it' you guys turn tail and run!**

A second student, PAUL, interjects.

PAUL

I'm frustrated so much I could kill myself! /

²⁴ A specific series of exercises detailed in Beat Two.

COOPER

People often say "is it wrong if I use this or that technique?"
but you can't will life!/"

CLEO

But what if I want it?!/"

COOPER

It's not an act of will! Do what you can do as deeply and as well as possible. It's vertical not horizontal. But the business is horizontal, because you want to play a twenty-one year-old who will be on the TV. But Art is wish-fulfilment. Art is not profit-making. Art is money-sucking. People don't get The System teaching in its truth because the world is gone. Lee's change was to make it individual, to make it fit that new world. Most acting teachers in Hollywood need to use Strasberg because it is individualistic.

PAUL

What about Meryl Streep? /

COOPER

She was trained by (Method teacher, and Cooper's own teacher, *my insertion*) Bobby Lewis. But she was always going to be great. She had such talent.

PAUL

Is that why you don't audition at Strasberg, because it's for wherever the individual is at?

COOPER

I don't want to be in a position to tell somebody they don't have talent. **You want it? That's America."**

Beat One: the contradiction of the essentialised self

CLEO

But if it's imagination, then it's not real. We're just making it up. I thought we weren't supposed to use 'imagination'.

Cleo's response that the imagination's lack of 'realness' was a problem – that it was somehow invalidating – strikes the ear as something strange, given acting is perceived to be 'pretending'; elaborate pretending, but pretending none-the-less. Indeed an argument could be made that 'realness' takes you away from the theatrical; that it is specifically its unreal – imaginative – quality that shifts 'theatre' from the everyday to the domain of the atypical.²⁵ Yet here Cleo is adamant that 'the real' is fundamental – something that I heard a lot at the school – and its absence is anxiety-inducing. I suspect a portion of this anxiety comes from a perceived historical schism within the trajectory of Stanislavskian practitioners that students can come to internalise; but this depends upon familiarity with that schism²⁶ – which, Cooper suggested to me, most students didn't actually *have*.

More acute is the students' concern (and here Cleo's concern) for *authenticity* in what they are doing. Note in the beat of the exchange, the imagination is paired with 'making it

²⁵ Anthropology's engagement with 'theatre' has primarily been on those terms: ritualised liminal behaviour, distinct from 'the real' (cf. Turner, 1971, 1981, 1982, 1990; Schechner 1985, 1990, Hastrup 1998, Goffman 1974).

²⁶ Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg were both members of The Group Theatre (1931-1937). The Group Theatre consisted of American actors (including Harold Clurman, Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets, Stella Adler, Robert Lewis, Sanford Meisner, Bobby Lewis), who worked and trained together, inspired by The Moscow Arts Theatre, with Strasberg in charge of training and Clurman its Artistic Director. Between 1931 and 1941, The Group produced some of the seminal work of the American Theatre in the 20th Century. In 1934 Adler, married to Clurman, returned from Paris where she had met Stanislavski, announcing: "Stanislavski said we're doing it wrong" (cited Hirsch 1984: 79). Adler claimed Strasberg was over-emphasising 'internal work', which Stanislavski 'had moved past'. Strasberg replied, "Stanislavski doesn't know, I know!" (ibid.)

Each subsequently taught their own understanding, with a schism eventually being reified around a *perceived* opposition between "using the imagination" and using "memory/real life": the result of a misunderstood simplification. As Cooper makes clear it is a false opposition, but nevertheless some students internalise it without understanding its inherent fallacy, I argue, through a desire to be situated within a *narrative* that is (they assume) much grander than themselves, becoming disciples of that mythic narrative, and achieving a perceived status from it.

up', which seemed to Cleo obviously *inauthentic*, and therefore negative: "if it is imagination then it's not real" – the value being attributable only as a function of its 'realness'. But what sort of realness, what sort of authenticity, is she drawing value from/attributing value to? Exactly what is it that, in this context, is (or is not) authentic? Rather than an allusion to operating outside the theatrical frame (cf. Goffman 1974) – so *really* hitting somebody, or accepting the events of a fictitious stage encounter as 'real' – I suggest it is *an authenticity that comes from consciously drawing upon her conception of 'self' as the source of creativity*; specifically drawing upon her own experiences and memories, through some of the techniques outlined in Beat Two, rather than upon (what she perceives to be) an exterior resource 'out there' somewhere, in an imaginary 'other' (which, in this event, is Cleo's call to the 'imagination'), and that is the equivalent of 'just making it up'.²⁷ There is a synonymy here between *real:interior:self:good* and, in opposition, *imaginary:exterior:other:bad*, and for Cleo The Method is about accessing that authentic 'real' 'interior' 'good' 'self' – remember that her involvement in the 'event' all started with her misunderstanding of (a falsely perceived) exteriority in Michael Chekhov's work. This is why actors at Strasberg often talked about 'going deep'; accessing 'parts of themselves they didn't know they had', 'really giving of themselves', after a 'successful' exercise or *etude*. The question that we must ask, is: *why* is drawing upon the self perceived to be 'good'/'successful', and what does this say about conceptualisations of self in the first place?

The anthropological literature of Western self/personhood²⁸ articulates the emergence of an innate, interior oneness and mind/body unity (cf. Mauss 1938, Dumont, 1980, 1985,

²⁷ Note 'Just making it up' implies a spontaneous creative act, without the implication of sacrifice that is inherent in the notion of drawing upon oneself, an implication that we might consider in narrative terms (Heraclitus overcomes obstacle to achieve) and also as akin to 'spending oneself', or 'consuming oneself' into selfhood (cf. Wagner 1995).

²⁸ One of the significant conceptual problems in the literature is that self and personhood have largely been assumed to be synonymous, if not in conceptual totality, then at least in academic practice; partly because the trajectory follows Mauss, himself following Kant, who assumes that self being a 'category' and "the vehicle of all concepts" (Kant 1963 A 341-2) cannot know itself (cf. Lukes 1985, Carrithers 1985). Whilst there is not the scope to go further into this topic, I postulate that in the theoretical post-capitalist moment that this paper ultimately alludes to, personhood might *collapse into* a selfhood *of wants*, as it is fractally essentialised.

Geertz 1984²⁹) as well as challenging the totalising assumptions of that position on both cross-cultural (Ewing, 1990, Rosaldo 1984, Lutz and Abu Lughod 1990), and also ontological grounds (Strathern 1988, 1992, Wagner 1981, 1985, Murray 1990, Battaglia 1995). But whether the conception of self is totalised or not (– indeed, whether or not there is even *any relevance* in such a dichotomising construction; and I shall return to this idea in the final beat of the paper, to argue that it might be *useful* to think about selfhood relationally/postplurally [cf. Strathern 1992] but with *those* relations being conceptually interior [cf. Pedersen, forthcoming], abstending ‘inward’, rather than ‘outward’, therefore; a meta-product of Capitalism’s fractal, essentialising tendency –) I argue the assertion of value onto the *assumed* (by the acting students) innate self – that which Murray calls the “transcendent self” (Murray 1990: 6) and which is variously “*autonomous, bounded, stable, perduring, continuous or unitary*” (ibid) – is the consequence of its conceptualisation as the *essentialised* form of the subjective individual: i.e. it is ‘good’ because it is essentialised, and its essentialised status is here transformed in a value-judgement, by Cleo, into ‘real’, as opposed to ‘imaginary’. *So, de facto, it is ‘real’ because it is essentialised.*

It is not surprising therefore to learn that ‘getting’ to that self is often conceptualised by students as a process of ‘stripping back’ – *i.e. of essentialising*: of getting through the ‘layers’ of contingency and social role (cf. Goffman 1956) – which is re-conceptualised as working backward through time, precisely drawing upon *past* experiences (via things like recall exercises, described in the next beat), which, being ‘in the past’, are de facto, assumed to be ‘deeper’, closer to an assumed essential core, hence more ‘real’, and ‘better’. And just as in Vignette (1), I argue this *essentialisation-of-self* is another transversion/abstension of Capitalism-in-process, fractally perpetuated in practice when

²⁹ Geertz’ conceptualisation of Western personhood is useful as a null-position, from which the debate has been challenged and reconceived: “The Western conception of the person is a bounded unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organised into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background” (Geertz 1984: 126).

Cleo and her colleagues draw upon an essentialised conception of self, to make their work 'real', rather than 'imaginary'.³⁰

But when Cooper responds he implies Cleo has misunderstood the opposition between real and imaginary in the context of the actor's craft – subtly, but fundamentally:

COOPER

You have to bring it back to affective memory; it's *affective*; people always take it too literally and forget affective. Your imagination is a delivery system. It works, but perhaps there is no content there yet. And if it truly doesn't work, perhaps you just can't take the note.

He is saying that memory – in this context, the 'real' – exists *within* the imagination,³¹ not apart from it; hence any attempt to 'use the memory' (i.e. *to draw upon their 'authentic' self*) is inherently an *imaginative* act. The imagination 'delivers' the memory and then, in the creative act of 'lf', to which Cooper refers immediately prior, the imagination recombines the facets of 'real' experience unconsciously into an 'affective' resource: i.e. one that triggers belief in the imaginary circumstances of the play, *as opposed to the recreation of a past experience from the actor's life*. It is this aspect, the capacity to engender belief in the imaginary circumstances, that is key to understanding The Method as Strasberg – and Cooper – taught it. But superficially Cooper *seems to be* collapsing an opposition between 'real' and 'imaginary' – which ostensibly *seems* illogical/contradictory

³⁰ There is another layer to this – another abstension – that I shall pick up more fully in the final beat. Following Wagner (1995), the process of essentialisation can be reconceived as a labour of creation, whereby in the act of 'stripping away', a conception of selfhood is *engendered* through labour of consumption and want, and is reconceptualised as *innate*: self then becomes the process of Capitalism-as-essentialisation given subjectivity. This 'innate' self is, therefore, used as a resource for authenticity in theatrical work, and which is given value because its innateness – its essentialisation – has been so well-crafted/given subjectivity. This is a self that we might understand as hyper-real (cf. Baudrillard 1983, 1994) whereby the imaged, or, ironically, the imagined self becomes the authentic, and the category of 'original' is over-written, so that it was never there. What is exposed as real by the actors in their work – and which in a sense *is* real – is, therefore, something designed as real, because it is *wanted* to be so.

³¹ cf. wider work on anthropology of the imagination; for overview, see Holbraad and Pedersen 2009b

– and is asking Cleo to embrace a concept (the imagination) entirely antithetical to what *she* believes makes her work authentic and therefore valuable at the same time. What is more, he seems to tell her that if she cannot do this, then there is an ‘innate’(!) problem in her – “perhaps you just can’t take the note”. The consequence: Cleo becomes very agitated. The significant point is that, in the most obvious sense, Cleo’s reaction is, mundanely, correct: it *is* antithetical. *To be very clear, this is in no way a comment on Cooper’s teaching, which is of the very highest calibre.* It is a comment on The Method, as it might be taken to exist *now*. There *is* seemingly something inherently confusing about it, intrinsically contradictory.

Beat Two: the 'work' of The Method

COOPER

You guys do not have actors' concentration. You want the solution. You've got to relax so deeply that the unconscious bubbles into the conscious.

Cooper roots the problem in the lack of a particular concentration, and directly we are brought to the centre of The Method's principles. In this beat I go through what those principles are, and how they are trained, before returning to Cooper's engagement with Cleo, and the contradiction which is, I argue, inherent in *Capitalism-as-essentialisation*, and of which all the other contradictions are abstentions: the separation of value from labour – the "dream of medieval alchemy" (Comaroff and Comaroff *ibid*).

Stanislavski recognised that 'acting well' depended upon being physically and psychologically relaxed and simultaneously disparately concentrated – a concentration that is 'horizontal' rather than 'vertical': able to respond to many stimuli simultaneously rather than to one in particular. Those 'stimuli' are the circumstances of the play, real/imagined: characters on-stage, but also time, temperature, 'scenic event', objects, associations for those objects within the imaginary lives of characters, the actor's next line(s), the audience, the lighting, the blocking (the line of physical behaviour that ensures performances 'look' similar). In short the barrage of sensory information that takes place in a real-life event, which informs behaviour, *plus* the peculiar demands of the stage. And if some of these stimuli are ignored – the actor does not 'receive' them/is not disparately concentrated enough to 'take them in' – the on-stage work is subtly (but visibly) diminished: they are unbelievable in their onstage action – because, in a way that is perceptible, the actor is not quite behaving accurately given the circumstances. An example from an *etude* in Cooper's class on a different day:

Caroline knocks on the door to an apartment that is not hers. No one answers. She knocks again. She opens the (seemingly) unlocked door and steps in: "Is anyone there? Hello?" She looks around, sitting by a coffee table, feeling the texture of its tablecloth. She steps through another doorway into a bedroom - and goes through the contents of a dressing-table, as though this was her home. Cooper stops the class. He tells Caroline to start the improvisation again; her behaviour hadn't taken into account the circumstances' true reality. "Knock on the door again". She does. Then she steps through. "Stop!" Cooper. "Would you really just go into somebody's house if they didn't answer first time? You wouldn't knock again?" Cooper proceeds to dissect Caroline's on-stage behaviour, challenging her on why she did not, on hearing no response, knock more loudly, then perhaps call from outside? "If there seemed to be no-one there", he suggested, "wouldn't you just leave? To go into an unlocked house of a stranger when the door wasn't answered - to even attempt to turn the handle of the door - is a huge decision." Cooper surmises that Caroline was more concerned with what she had *planned* - "you knew you'd go into the apartment because you, the actor, *knew* nobody was there, when you had no reason to know that" - than with the moment-to-moment shifting (imaginative) reality that she was actually 'in'.

The actor was not sufficiently concentrated upon the myriad circumstances, but to achieve that concentration - which is really a *presentness*³² - bearing in mind some of the stimuli are not physically real but are imaginatively created (the door was not the door of an apartment, and so had to be imaginatively created as one) - is hard. It requires the actor

³² cf. Barber 1995, on the similar pre-expressive state, the exploration of which he calls "theatre anthropology"; and Csikszentmihalyi (2008), on the notion of 'flow'.

be very sensitive to the environment, and *also* very physically relaxed: the two go hand-in-hand.

Strasberg, following Stanislavski's recognition of the principles, developed specific techniques training these inter-related states, concentration and relaxation, which form(ed) the basis of all the exercises, known as "Sensory", which the actors undertake in the first part of their acting classes, and I go through them now.

The exercises begin in a chair, such that 'one could fall asleep.' The actor is then encouraged to investigate the physical capacity of their body, using only their mind, identifying habitual tensions and then relaxing them through movement of the particular area – literally 'breaking the tension' – and through the simultaneous expulsion of voiced sound. When successful, the actor causes himself to physically relax, engendering the required concentration. Eventually the actor ought to be able to relax without any movement at all (Indeed, the reason investigation is undertaken *without* physical manipulation – i.e. without massaging the body to break habitual tension – is because the actor must also be able to physically relax *on stage* during performance.)

The actor then begins Strasberg's exercise sequence – the exact exercise dependent upon the individual's progression. The sequence begins with the imaginative creation of a coffee-cup, including its sensory reality (e.g. heat, weight, viscosity, flavour, smell) through the application of the actor's sense-memory – the psycho-physical manipulation of the body's sensory capacity that we recognise when we 'taste' salt-and-vinegar crisps after hearing hear their mention. The sequence then goes through full-body sensorial creation of sunlight, shower/rain, intoxication, pain, combinations of these, also incorporating monologues – ('threesomes', or 'foursomes') – and then into more idiosyncratic exercises: 'Personal Object' (endowing objects with emotional resonance), 'Song and Dance' (a spontaneous achievement of free-expression to overcome the anxiety of being watched), 'Private Moment' (behaving accurately as if in private, in public), and 'Emotional

Recall/'Emotional Memory' (the *imaginative* recreation of a past event through specific sensory attention, resulting in the engendering of strong emotional expression; though to some extent all the exercises can have this effect.) In the first instance, however, all sensory exercises depend upon a disparate concentration achieved through relaxation, alone in the chair.

The relaxation process looks bizarre: the individual is moving parts of their body, half-singing for prolonged periods, sometimes for an over an hour. Movements *should be irregular*, individual, and idiosyncratic because physical tensions are uniquely held. *However often what actually happens* is that movement is fairly *constant across the class*; attention is largely directed towards shoulders and hips (which is technically strange because these are normally the most, rather than least 'released' areas of the body, but is, in another sense, obvious because – being attached to the limbs – these are also the parts of the body which are easiest *to be seen to be* being 'worked'), and the whole enterprise is strangely synchronised. Often students move the same parts of their body at the same time; start to give voice to breath at the same time, or begin to shout or cry within a few beats of each other. ³³

Rather than being undertaken correctly, as specific investigations of each actor's body, a generic (iconic) version of the exercise is often undertaken *en mass* as students copy each other – *the image* of the exercise – and, at that point it ceases to work. What is revealed by the synchronisation/imitation I observed – and phenomenologically when I attempted the exercises – is that achieving concentrated relaxation requires genuine, time-consuming *labour*, and without it, *you act badly*. Hence we return to Cooper's Class:

COOPER

³³ Crying during 'Sensory' is seen by students as a mark of success because it is read as 'the *real* you'. Note the connection between an innate individual/self and emotionality in a Western conception of self (cf. Lutz 1988, Lutz and Abu Lughod 1990)

But in the Twenty-First Century, you are literally fighting the gods. It's so overwhelming; the sex, the money, the power. Everybody buys into it and it sucks you in - but we passed work in the Twentieth Century. No one does it anymore. Acting is like ditch-digging. It's not being a movie-star. It's work! When I was your age I had *this* level of energy, *this* level of concentration every day. I am not bullshitting. People do not understand this. With Sensory, it starts out with sympathetic feeling, and then becoming something more acute, but you have to *work* at it. I see you guys waving your arms around - that's not it!

CLEO

But what if I want it?!/

COOPER

It's not an act of will!

What we see is that the students' conception of success in The Method (and the conception of success more generally, and its transformation/abstention, value) has been essentialised into one that does not include labour – i.e. it has been brought to the point of contradiction inherent in advanced Capitalism that Marx indicated, where “social formation does not look to labour as its dynamic foundation” (Tronti 1980:32) but to *want* – want given subjectivity as self-hood, as I shall argue in the final beat (cf. Wagner 1995); its only materiality being conceptual: ‘want’ becomes its material base. But The Method *requires material labour* – ‘ditch-digging’ – which Cooper laments ‘nobody does any more.’ A counter-argument emerges, the full exploration of which I delay until the final beat, but which I articulate here, as ‘good to think with’. Perhaps work *is* being done, labour is being carried out, but the target for that labour has shifted fundamentally, from ‘the craft of the artist’ to the ‘image of the crafting artist’, and then to its ultimate progression, the ‘image of

the essentialised self' – so towards something that Baudrillard might consider hyper-real; i.e. its (most?) *essentialised* Capitalist form, minus materiality; which ironically, is also starting to accrue a social and material value (wealth) that artistic craft (materiality) alone cannot achieve – as Baudrillard writes:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself, that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, a metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine, which provides all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced. (Baudrillard 1983:2)

Cooper recognises it is the culture of advanced Capitalism that has negated the pre-requisites of labour that The Method requires; which I argue is the consequence of Capitalism's defining essentialising/individuating character (to which we can add hyper-realising). And I argue The Method *itself* has also been essentialised/individuated; fractured through a process of Capitalism-as-essentialisation, away from the principles of collectivity upon which it is based, and towards something individualistic and end-(goal)-orientated. This results in a Method in *'the image of itself'* in simultaneous existence, and in competition with, its original/fundamental (material) craft, despite those agendas being contradictory; and *I argue this is the cause of Method's somewhat schizophrenic identity as I was experiencing it*. It is the emergence of this contradiction that I address in the next beat.

Beat Three: the essentialisation of The Method

COOPER

People don't get The System teaching in its truth because the world is gone. Lee's change was to make it individual, to make it fit that new world.

When I had been at Strasberg for a few weeks, I was invited to meet with the head, Samantha. Two things resonated in our conversation: firstly, there was an assumption held by the students that professional 'success' – employment, recognition, financial wealth and most significantly, visibility (so the *image* of success) – was very achievable. It required labour (as I shall discuss in the final beat) but its attainment was assumed – contra what I had encountered in UK drama schools where, although success *was aspired toward*, its eventual attainment was not assumed.

And secondly it struck me that the Institute didn't operate on the basis of 'a year-group', or 'the class', but on the *individual's trajectory*. "What you have to remember", Samantha told me, "is that the Institute is a *Studio*, and that's how the teachers teach". Although this seems obvious now, and although the Institute is called a school, it is a model of the Actors Studio. I believe the implication of this is significant, with regard to a more individuated, essentialised, Method as I shall show.

The Actors Studio was a private organisation where actors could attend – following successful audition – Lee Strasberg's classes³⁴; first at the Princess Theatre, then at Carnegie Hall, and then in a converted church on West 44th Street. It was never a school, however, but an environment away from the public gaze where (sometimes well-established) actors could work on their craft in critical safety. When the Strasberg Institute

³⁴ The Actors Studio was founded by original Group Theatre members, Elia Kazan, Cheryl Crawford and Robert Lewis. Lee Strasberg took over directorship in 1951, and remained until his death in 1982.

was founded it took on the same principles: it would be concerned methodologically *only* with the individual's relationship with the teacher, and concerned materially only with the actor's *individual* obstacles/trajectory.

But there is a conceptual problem here. The Method is the American (re)imagining of Stanislavski's System. The System was based upon a *full company of actors, training together* – for a period of years – to develop *shared technique*. It was out of this that the essence of The System emerged: actors behaving truthfully on stage, together; responding to the imaginary circumstances (as discussed in Beat Two), and all responding to the *same imaginary world*, as it was lived by those actors who had co-created it. And it depended upon *collective sustained labour* for its possibility/efficacy.

This is because an actor's truthful behaviour depends on it not being *pre-ordained*. In the theatrical context this sounds paradoxical, but it is not. Whilst the through-line of behaviour is 'known' the best actors are able to remain 'present' (through disparate concentration and relaxation) to 'live', beat-to-beat, trusting that their responses – in line with their character's needs – will drive the scenic action forward (becoming, the given circumstances for the *next* beat etc), thereby enabling continual improvisation through a known structure. *But the mechanism for this improvisatory practice, which is, in the deepest sense, the essence of Stanislavski's System and so also The Method, is systemic*: it relies upon the network of actors *also* 'living beat-to-beat', because each actor's behaviour *becomes the given circumstances* for every other actor's. So ironically The System dictates that primary responsibility is for your colleague's performance. It is a collective rather than individual task rooted in a cohesive acting strategy. This approach was undertaken by The Group Theatre, but by the time the Actors Studio was established out of The Group's embers, the circumstances for long-term dedication to collective craft in America had disappeared, replaced – through necessity of circumstance – by an ethos of individualistic endeavour, coinciding with the growth of American Individualism and the free-market.

And if the necessary conditions for collective, long-term labour were disappearing then, *now they are virtually entirely absent*. And it is from this genesis that The Strasberg Institute exists: teaching an approach to acting that is, in its platonic form, dependent upon long-term collective labour for its success, but that is taught on individual trajectories, without the Group ethos which originally supported it. And so we arrive back in Cooper's class and some of the confusion becomes a little clearer:

COOPER

People don't get The System teaching in its truth because the world is gone. Lee's change was to make it individual, to make it fit that new world.

No wonder Cleo and her colleagues (and myself) found The Method so confusing. The groundwork, *the culture*, upon which it is based no longer exists: it has been essentialised away. Hence Cooper's job is incredibly (impossibly?) hard, and my huge admiration for him; because he is nevertheless trying to teach and preserve it.

But I don't think it is even that simple (!), because, as Cooper indicates, what is now called The Method also *changed* – and *is changing* – as a consequence of a process of essentialisation. Although Cooper implies Strasberg's agency in changing The Method, in more developed conversations he corrected himself, removing the connotation of Strasberg's intention. Most accurately, Cooper suggested The Method *was changed* by the demands *of the market* (which included Hollywood, and the need for immediate results without rehearsal), and Lee Strasberg changed *too*, to accommodate those demands. So the elements of The Method that required collectivity – The Method 'proper', rooted in the true extent of Stanislavski's System, and its focus on 'living beat-to-beat' – were subsumed, whilst those which served only the individual's needs, were emphasised. *These are the Sensory exercises* – the techniques that allow you to generate a specific

emotion, moment, or sensation, to cue. What are, then, training tools have become, in a superficial but fundamental way, what The Method now *is*, because it has been essentialised by the demands of working outside an ensemble environment; arguably outside a theatrical environment entirely.

And I suspect this is what Cleo thought The Method is. And in a way *she is right*. It *is* those techniques, that capacity to draw upon one 'self' – to not, as she feared, 'make it up'. But this is not what The Method is to Cooper; hence his anger at the emphasis of what he termed "the laundry list": because it generated an assumption that the exercises constituted The Method – with the irony being that the exercises *have become (risk becoming?)* The Method, because they are the most relevant, *essentialised* elements an actor could use to solve individualistic acting problems. The essentialised, Capitalistic Method moves away from its materiality (craft) and towards an impression of itself; a set of techniques and the image of a particular kind of actor: Brando-eque, 'living the role' outside the frame of performance. And these conceptualisations start to structure and re-invent (cf. Wagner 1981) what the originating concept was, *through their use*. And, with a model of Capitalism as a process of essentialisation/individuation enacted through habitual behaviour, this is exactly what we should expect to happen to The Method because Capitalism's character dictates it will be fractally reproduced everywhere through human agency, essentialising and individuating through every sphere (ironically breaking down holistic conceptualisations – i.e. 'spheres', wholes, society etc), and fractally being (re)constituted in 'them'.

The irony is that, because of the effect of Capitalisation, the actor risks moving away from the possibility of 'acting well' as it encourages the fetishisation of particular problem-solving/training techniques until those techniques become not only what The Method is, but also *what acting is*. Cooper said as much, in private conversation, which I include here:

COOPER

That's not what Lee meant and that's not what it is. They get that idea because people want a sure-fire thing. It's in *A Dream Of Passion* where Lee says, finally, 'my series of exercises, if you must call something The Method, if you want to name what I am doing The Method, it's the exercises. Not the philosophy of acting. Not the approach to the part. It's these exercises. It's The Method now.' And as usual Lee is telling the truth. Yet if you take it in its bigger, *truer* sense, Method is when, actors *organically* experience within the imaginary circumstances. That would be the raw definition of it. It doesn't end up that way because everything is so individualistic, and everyone stakes out their territory; but in Lee's mind, that's what is. People don't understand that anymore. I do because of The Group, and because I have researched all the stages of Lee's life. So I have a sense of the big vision that drove his work. But all that is lost. Now it's about using *the work* of The Method to train the individual. The part of Lee that is about the whole sense of theatre - that's gone. The part of Lee about really pushing the individual is still alive and valuable, because that's what works in America. Movies. Television. The other has no place. It's not our world. *Even if it is right, it's not our world.* Believe me, I wish it was different. *I fought for it to be different.* So me saying that comes from long experience.

Hence such confusion, and, I believe, for Cooper, sadness. Isolated from the System which originated it, an essentialised Method stands in opposition to itself, the product of the essentialising, individuating process-as-Capitalism that is fractally reproduced, and which inculcates abstentions of its contradictions: value without materiality: Method

without collectivity: success without labour. And only a few people, like Cooper, and the other fine teachers at Strasberg, are fighting to re-articulate it; hence the reason for the Institute's vital importance.

In the final beat, I address how that last abstension, success without labour, might be re-imagined – perhaps there *is* labour going into the achievement of success but it is of a different order: it is, itself, essentialised, away from the labour of materiality/(craft), and toward the labour of *success*, which, I argue, takes the form of the enactment/performance (cf. Herzfeld 1985) of a *most* essentialised, visible 'self', in a *visible display of self-determination*; a self which is, following Wagner's argument, already a meta-conceptualisation of essentialisation – *wants given subjectivity*, "the need for a need" (1995:66) – and which, despite being a function of consumption, *acts* as its own unit of production, accruing real social/material value. I explore this primarily in relation to one actor: Katy – perhaps the anti-Cooper.

Beat Four: success as the visible display of self-determination

COOPER

You want it? That's America.

Perhaps what is most troubling about the rhetorics, popular and academic, that makes the self conceivable, and the idea of “self” that makes such reflective structures inevitable, is that the main point seems somehow to have been left out .

Wagner 1995: 75

Katy wanted to be a star. She had been in the first class I attended. From a wealthy background, she was part of the Moscow party scene: East London Cool, “but with more money”, she said.

Katy had a plan to ‘*make it*’ as an actor. But I realised *acting craft* didn’t really feature in that pursuit. This is not to say Katy was untalented – she was as competent as her colleagues – but she was not unduly interested in *being a talented* actor. She wanted to be *recognised/visible as successful*, and this was not a function, intrinsically, of (material) craft.

What she recognised was the need to *work hard* – making me think of Cooper’s assertions that students didn’t work hard *enough*. It took me time to recognise Katy’s commitment to hard work though, because she devoted her attention to matters that were, ostensibly, a long way from the labour demanded at the Institute. She spent a huge amount of time and money on her appearance, garbed in the faux-scruffy fashion that only indicated wealth – i.e. she dressed like she didn’t have the money. Her social life was hectic: always a bar to go to, to be seen at (– she took to meeting only at the bar where Lady Gaga was ‘discovered’ –), people to meet. Things, in short, that didn’t sound like work.

But where Cooper and Katy had divergent views, was in *what, exactly, one should be working hard at*. For Cooper work took place in the rehearsal studio; for Katy the *more* significant work took place in the clubs of New York. I re-state: Katy was not untalented and was a committed student; she was always prepared for her classes, and worked diligently with her scene partners. But her commitment, *a priori*, was to living a certain lifestyle, and being *visible* in a certain social scene, I argue, *as a route to her success*. For Katy, creating the right image – clothes, music, bars, (creating the right ‘self’ – or the image of the successful ‘self’, as I shall discuss) – was *as significant* as the work she did at Strasberg, because I believe she understood her lifestyle (and herself through/consuming that lifestyle) to be *necessary and constituent* in engendering success. This is what her work *was* – a work of consumption, rather than materiality: success by Taussigean mimesis³⁵ ‘consuming the other to become it’.

And whilst it would be easy to assume Katy was misguided, to do so massively undervalues the complexity of her behaviour and the situation. Because actually, I think Katy was (at least partially!) right: she was working at creating a successful self/image-of-a-successful-self because she knew intuitively that, even if it had not always been so, the image of success *is* now the dominant constituent *of* success, subsuming its (originary) materiality (acting craft) to accrue the value which had been *associated* with materiality – though, crucially, I argue, in this context, not value inherent to materiality but through the *visibility* materiality enabled.

Let me model this: (theoretically) there was a time when the talented actor (i.e. the materially skilled actor) *was* rewarded materially (and socially); but the reward was actually *always* a function of the actor’s visibility, which depended upon their talent: talent made you visible; visibility was rewarded. But *now* one can be visible without, necessarily, talent/materiality, and accrue the value of that visibility. Ironically, at *that* point, (i.e. from the position of visibility), it is more plausible to achieve ‘legitimate’ acting work

³⁵ cf. Taussig 1993.

(employment – ostensibly dependent on material craft) because your visibility is already guaranteed. Visibility – the privileging of the image – retrospectively subsumes the notion of material talent, so that, for the visible, talent is assumed – that is *why you are visible* – until whatever originally constituted material talent, (that thing Cooper is trying to nurture) loses all necessity, and talent in practice transforms into the art of making yourself visible: it becomes a hyper-real craft.

For Katy acting was not a material means to success so much as an *appropriate occupation* for herself, from an assumed position of her (future/)existent visibility, from where she is able to say, “I am an actor” and so, indeed, ‘become’ one, in the sense of continual (visible) employment. But what she might never need is the material craft that Cooper is teaching. So you get this strange situation where what she is being taught, might not actually be what is *needed*; which isn’t necessarily to be talented, *but to be successful*. Most succinctly, the talent that is needed is the talent for success, (which Katy had), rather than the talent for craft, which she (also) had, but actually didn’t need.

And my encounters with Katy finally clarified something that I had been close to understanding: it wasn’t just *visibility* that Katy sought. It was visibility *as herself*, in its most essentialised (Capitalised) form: i.e. *it was the visible display of self-determination* that had value, whereby people wanted to be seen to be being ‘the most them’ *that was success*. This is what was rewarded and *is conceived as most rewardable*. There are useful comparisons with Herzfeld (1988)’s arguments on the conceptualisation of ‘being a man’ in a rural Crete. He argues that in the Glendiot villages, in order to be ‘a man’, you had to *show* that you know what being a man *looks like*, and that you are *seen* to be doing it: i.e. *being* is a function of *poetics*: of visibility and performativity (cf. Schieffelin 1998³⁶), as opposed to a material innateness:

³⁶ Schieffelin, 1998, argues that *every act that constitutes culture is part of performative contingent processes* by which people *construct* their realities: i.e. culture itself is *poetics*: “Performativity is not only endemic to human being-in-the-world but *fundamental*” (my italics). (Schieffelin 1998:205)

In Glendiot idiom, there is less focus on being a good man, than on being good *at* being a man – a stance that stresses *performative excellence*, the ability to foreground manhood by means of deeds that strikingly speak for themselves.

Herzfeld 1988:16

So, here: to be a successful self, you must be visibly successful *at* being a successful self. At that point you actually accrue real value, becoming a unit of production counter-invented (cf. Wagner 1981) out of an absence of materiality. This is what Katy is doing. Indeed this is what all successful actors seem to be doing. Hollywood movie-stars are performing epitomised selves into being, and are rewarded. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are lauded – they really are American Royalty – because they are ultimate versions of themselves: we do not see the characters they portray; we see ‘them’ – the essentialised them, certainly, but beyond a certain point, it becomes conceptually irrelevant whether or not there *is* anything else, which as I now argue, may be indeed the case: a selfhood rationalised into absence.

“Look Look! These will be the greatest actors in America one day”. Why does the young mother give aspirational credence to these (student) strangers? Because at their most visible, actors seem to be the most *them*: the paradigm of a Capitalist ideal of selfhood, and so success. But I argue, following Wagner 1995, that the conceptualisation of successful selfhood which is *being performed* into being – and which is accruing value in its visibility – has, itself, necessarily been essentialised through Capitalism-as-process (i.e. through the habituated actions of all the Katys) into (most essentially) *subjectivity bestowed upon desire*: i.e. into *wants* counter-invented into the perception of innateness in order to be a retrospective ‘object’ to source the sensation of cause, or *need* for consumption. In Wagner’s terms, self, then, is only “the need for a need” (ibid:66):

Performing the necessity of one’s own issue is an act of invention, literally enfolding oneself within the issue. It has the subjective valence or “feel” of discovering something about others in one’s own action, or what is called consciousness raising. And it has the objective valence of turning imitation of self into something that

looks and feels like conviction...One important consequence of self-making is that the principles and legitimacy of the act are made derivative or epiphenomenal to the act itself; they become, in the scare quotes of everyday parlance, “causes”.

Wagner 1995: 67

This is why, ultimately, Katy needs to continually *consume* through her life-style to be visible/successful – why her work is the *right* work (as opposed to Cooper’s): because the essentialised self, acting as a unit of production, *only exists in the act of consumption as this is what it has been essentialised to: a counter-invented consumptive need*. Finally I argue this conception of self – its ultimate essentialisation through Capitalism-as-process (perhaps *the ultimate essentialisation*) – bears structural similarity to a relational conceptualisation of selfhood (cf. Strathern, 1992), except that ‘the relationality’ is not applicable between external human relations – because as I have argued in Vignette (1) and in relation to The Method, collectivity as anything other than lots of ‘mechanically solid’ individuals has been essentialised away – but internally (cf. Pedersen, forthcoming), *between ‘needs-for-need’*: i.e. a self constituted by the internal relations of *want* alone (cf. Wagner’s quotation at the head of this beat: that the ‘innate’, or even *human subjectivity* in conceptualisations of selfhood has been “left out”). I also theorise this is (inadvertently) the implication of what Cooper said when he told Cleo, “Perhaps there is no content there”. Not ‘no content’, but perhaps the absence of innateness, and only the ‘needs for need’, hence her fear of a lack of authenticity. For her to be successful – ‘real’ in her terms – ironically maybe Cleo needs to work at her consumption, like Katy, because, logically, actors, as the most visible of selves (hence the most successful) must, de facto, also be the iconic selves-as-consumers which, of course, they seem to be, given the scale of their material wealth at the highest ‘most successful’ level.

But there is a great paradox. Those actors who are not visible – who have invested their energies only in the materiality of craft (so ironically, probably the most ‘legitimately talented’) – are perceived to be the least successful. This is one of the extra-ordinary idiosyncrasies of art in a hyper-Capitalistic moment. Capitalism dictates that you are

rewarded for your labour. But in the instance of artistic craft, labour 'at it' often has the opposite effect. An artist is likely to become *less visible* because their dedication to craft takes them away from the work of making themselves visible so the best artists can end up the least 'successful' ones, both materially *and* socially – for that visibility transforms itself into both material and social value: wealth, and status. Cooper understood this, because it is his narrative. He ran a permanent company for eight years in 1990s Indianapolis – Spine Theatre – dedicated to material craft and the original ethos of The Method. And whilst the work produced was outstanding in craft, their visibility was not high enough to give them the financial security they needed, nor the social capital that would have enabled them 'to make it' and so use their social capital materially; perhaps because they never understood, at the time, the need to 'work at' visibility – in the way that Katy, thirty years later, *does*. But Cooper knew it was an impossible situation: the craft *would* disappear the moment it was more visible, because being 'a success', with its essentialising, structuring and Capitalistic momentum, would inevitably result in the loss of circumstances upon which the craft depended. Cooper's words seem to be the best way to end the beat, from conversation made over Mexican food, in Hoboken, NJ, the weekend before I left:

COOPER

You need to be doctors, bankers, teachers, whatever. And then *this* is what you do to fulfil your life. We're not going to be using art to make a living. I am not sure, at least in theatre, if art can make a living for you any more. I don't think it can. In America if you took away all the subsidy for all the regional theatres, all the grants, they would all close. Theatre would quickly congeal just to Broadway. So I don't think unless you play the game, become part of all that – and then all the art goes anyway. And that was the one mistake I made. I should have realised with Spine we were doing something that was purely

artistic: that was never going to supply us truly with a middle-class living, and I should have told everyone to do that, and we would have worked on it, and then I think it would have worked. Because it would have been like the guy that's got two giant greenhouses full of orchids, because they're in love with them. And the orchids are extraordinarily high level; amazing from a botanical, horticultural point of view. But it's not a nursery. *And I should have known that.* It's the one big mistake I made - because I wanted to build that dream of a National Theatre idea (*a permanent company of actors working with shared technique over time, producing American classics, my insertion*). To make what everyone else had tried; I wanted to make it, and I should not have had that egotistical response. But it wasn't like I had this idea and didn't do it; I didn't have it 'til later, so. I did the best I could.

Conclusion: a return to narrativity

In concluding this paper I return to the beginning and ‘the methodology of fractals’, and then offer a point of departure. I suggested that Capitalism could be understood as a process of essentialisation/individuation enacted by individuals through their habituated behaviour, and that this formulation has a peculiar fractal quality that is both ‘structured and structuring’, momentum inherent, so that in the process of its enactment it transforms/abstends the ‘objects’ *into* processes of essentialisation/individuation, and refuses abstraction when scaled. Conversely this makes a methodology that is dependent *upon* scaling – e.g. a ‘small-scale large issue’, or a ‘network’ approach – ontologically inappropriate because it rests upon a metaphysic of holism that cannot be applied to fractal processes: Capitalism-as-process does not get ‘simpler’, nor reveal itself as ‘part of a greater whole’ the ‘further from it’ your conceptual gaze travels. Hence I have argued that Capitalism-as-process *is the same* at the level of the individual *is the same* at the level of the town *is the same* at the level of the Strasberg Institute *is the same* at the theoretical level of The Method itself is the same as the enactment of self-essentialised-to-‘wants given subjectivity’; Consequently I argue it does not matter which ‘objects’ I chose to construct this paper around, because their *disconnection* – their abstension *of* each other – is the methodological and conceptual point. Hence (ostensibly *disconnected*) vignettes, and ‘intensively abstracting’ beats, to frame my arguments. As to whether it worked, I am cautiously optimistic: Derrida’s assertion that content always dictates form means that even if there are problems with this approach, that it is in some senses confusing – and is ultimately an *impression* of fractality – I argue this is because the character of the object itself *is confused*. Contradiction/confusion is inherent within it; following Hegel, contradiction is conceptually *necessary* in providing its internal (essentialising) momentum. And I argued that as Capitalism-as-process was enacted, it reproduced the inherent contradiction within itself – of attempting to achieve value without materiality – which, when manifested in the ethnographic objects, necessarily made them confusing and contradictory also: the objects *becoming/being* abstensions *of* Capitalism. This was most obvious in trying to understand what The Method is: both a collection of

techniques – ostensibly training tools – which give the image of a craft based on collective labour, without the material basis of that craft, *and also simultaneously that craft itself*, preserved and taught by with infinite dedication by teachers like Cooper. Yet this multiple identity is, paradoxically, also what makes The Method continually relevant: as Cooper said, ‘Lee’s change was to make it fit that new world’.

I also explored how labour was differently conceived, with Katy intuitively understanding that her labour needed to be targeted at performing her self into visibility; because her visible self, which I argued, following Wagner, was simply subjectivity conceptualised around desire – “the need for a need” – is able, from the point of visibility, to accrue real material value that the invisible could not, regardless of its original materiality.

There is one factor that I have not explored, partly because there has not been the space, and partly because Capitalism was never my intended object. That is: there is an assumption, in the very first conceptual instance, that those becoming successful through their visible self-determination have the resources to survive in the *first place*: i.e. they have the money *to be able to* consume – so *somewhere there must be ‘real’ materiality* that is enabling all this. And this was true. Katy had money; most of the students had money. So I ask, at the end-point, what will happen when theoretically materiality has been entirely essentialised into its absence, and whether we are, in fact, approaching that moment. But this is not for now.

Finally I intimated that the original hook to my inquiry was an exploration of narrative – high-jacked by what I found ‘in the field’. I return to narrative now: if there is a process of emergent narrativisation (cf. Mattingly 2000) occurring in what I saw, I argue it is enfolded within Capitalism-as-essentialisation. A successful narrative life becomes the phenomenological experience of successful Capitalism; the obstacles of the hero being the counter-invented ‘needs’ for consumption that constitutes the Capitalist self, with the hero becoming ‘successful’ by consuming themselves into visibility. But this makes the life

of the artist very hard, almost impossibly so, as that visibility – metonymic of the entire fractal and essentialising effects of Capitalism – takes you away from the essence of what it is, as an artist, that you do. And it is with this that I end – Cooper, a true artist, appropriately getting the last word, taken from that same conversation in Hoboken:

COOPER

Our whole philosophy is that you can do anything you want to do. But that's not true. I know that because having tried to create an ensemble theatre, I understand *so powerfully*. Because I thought if I understood everything The Group did, The Moscow Arts, I would have the secret; that it was just more *will*. If I could hang on longer, I could flick the switch and make it happen; but I realised, no. Yes there are better ways to make work, but ultimately it is impossible. If you have millions of dollars forever, then it's possible. Because it doesn't matter if you never make a penny. You can pay every show, every rehearsal. But in any kind of real world, it is impossible. That's why it doesn't exist. It took me years to get over it. Where I did nothing. It was devastating, and I have probably never fully recovered, ever. Because there was a light that went out at that moment, that in no way could ever come back on. There was a part of me that died. Because that was what I was born to do. It is how I see the world. It is the central problem in America, it's everything I wish I could change. It's everything the absence of which makes all the problems we have, it goes so far beyond theatre. It's an entire social and political answer. The entire culture. I finally realised I wasn't struggling with theatre or finances. Or individual egos. I was struggling with the entire historical colossus. And I didn't have the money to exist outside it to make

it possible. Which is why I've never done it again. I would love to, there are moments where I've been very close. But then that moment goes. No matter how much you achieve, the moment will come where this is impossible. I'm an artist trying to live in the desert. I will survive for a while but I will finally die.

DAN

If you were to attempt it again, knowing it would end, would you cope with it better?

COOPER

No. Because it would be like leftovers. I've been through all that before. So it would not be new. In the sense of, I would know the tricks. In the moment of doing it, I could forget that, but it would always come back when I was alone.

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