

INTRODUCTION: METHOD ACTING

ASK YOURSELF THIS: did members of the Greatest Generation spend a lot of time talking about where they were and what they did and how they felt when they first heard the news from Pearl Harbor? People certainly remembered the moment, and a few anecdotes got passed around—but did a whole folk genre spontaneously emerge? Did everyone feel compelled to craft a little narrative, starring me, an oft-repeated and inevitably embellished story-for-the-ages reporting on my personal experience of the Event? Or did they just assume that Pearl Harbor and its consequences were what mattered, and talk about *that*.

Well, where I was when JFK was assassinated was in the dance studio of an acting school in Manhattan. About thirty would-be actors and actresses were milling around the room in leotards, stretching, contemplating their mirror images, leaning against the walls, musing, chatting—waiting for our instructor to arrive. I was perched on a windowsill, looking out at the street. New York in autumn, when the world was young.

The studio door opened and, instead of the instructor, there appeared the assistant to the director of the school. She looked around, hesitating, groping for words, and finally just said, “President Kennedy has been shot. We don’t yet know how serious it is.” And then she left. There was some stirring and murmuring for a minute or so, a couple of people followed her out, and then someone, I couldn’t tell who, said, “It’s an improv.”

Well. Ever hang out with really serious acting students? This was irresistible. We turned as one to consult our repertoire of methods, methods for accessing analogous memories, for identifying specific intentions, for sustaining internalized independent activities, for reacting rather than acting—we were all determined to “be in the moment,” which was what one learned to do in those days, studying under Strasberg or Meisner or Adler, mentors to Geraldine Page and Robert Duvall, to Marlon Brando and James Dean, heirs to the prophet Stanislavsky, founder of modernist theater, who had scorned the external postures of “acting” and made inner truth, being real, the holy grail of his art. That was the point of all the strenuous psychological techniques known collectively as the Method, and we were devoted to them. So when, twenty minutes later, the assistant (who had been a talent in her day, we knew) returned to announce, her voice trembling, breaking, that the president was dead, well, at *that* point, the party really got started.

Acting students fall into two basic categories: the ones who love to do anger and the ones who love to do tears. I was the anger type, thank heaven, so there wasn't much in the way of overt emoting for me to do under this premise. I just lapsed into detached brooding, a fugue-state observing kind of thing. The situation didn't suit my talents; this was a moment for the impresarios of tears. And how they went at it. Within minutes, more than a third, almost half the people in the room were crying. Some were into silent weeping, sitting in a corner, maybe, uptilted face, the gaze averting now and then to rest at random on some stretch of ceiling where the pattern of the peeling paint signified the meaninglessness of it all. A couple of girls were crumpled to the floor, fallen to their knees, doing the helpless palms-turned-upward thing, keening like Electra over the corpse of Agamemnon. Still others linked

up for communal shock and horror, for hugs and consolation and testimonials to Camelot. And so on.

Eventually one of the people who had left the room after the first announcement came back, caught on to what was happening, and began to set the record straight. The president was, in fact, dead. This was not an improvisation. Other people went to investigate. One came back with a transistor radio. Reality was reestablished.

I got out of there immediately. What I saw in those newly stricken faces, which had already looked about as stricken as faces can look, was more than I cared to see. Adjusting to this trick of fate, the actors were orders of magnitude more aware of themselves than usual—which is saying a lot—but aware also of a truth penetrating, looking for a virgin place to settle, looking for buttons to push that hadn't already been pushed. But to no avail. The embarrassment was excruciating, unique in my experience, before or since. It wasn't that we were exposed as phonies in the usual sense. Affectation and sincerity were not ultimately the issue. This went much deeper. It was the realization that there was nothing left, no level or nuance of feeling that hadn't become a resource for our enterprise of Method acting. It was the spiritual equivalent of the last step in the dark, the one that isn't there when you put your foot down. Coldhearted witness to the follies of humanity that I was, even then, I could not endure the spectacle. I felt sure we had all, in some subtle way, been damaged forever.

Okay, that's a special case—extreme, condensed, taut with ironic perfection. But it has stayed with me over the years, stimulated by more complicated cases that seemed somehow to echo that original. It was as if the day the actors mourned had established

a paradigm, as they (used to?) say, a pure standard to which messier manifestations of human reflexivity could only aspire. If you happen to be philosophically inclined, you might say those mourning actors exemplified a phenomenological essence, a perfect distillation of a defining quality.

I was reminded of them, for example, more recently, watching other mourners, assembled in their millions on the streets of London. Princess Diana's mourners, so many of them, so obviously exhibiting their grief, not even pretending that they weren't exhibiting it, understanding that this was their role, in both the sociological and theatrical sense, understanding that they were there for this purpose in service of the Global Show that their very presence was inciting, producing, and promoting in real time—a show about them “being in the moment” in what amounted to a worldwide improv. Celebrities all, celebrities at last.

And more than that. They also took control of the script, you recall, as they deployed their bouquets, batteries of floral cannon aimed at the gates of Buckingham Palace. This was, as one broadcaster (I think Jane Pauley) put it (not quite understanding the implications), a “people-driven story.” The fact that stories usually aren't people driven suggests what was at stake. Those celebrity masses were, in effect, virtual revolutionaries. They were staking their claim to a new significance in public culture by means of a symbolic demand. They wanted Queen Elizabeth to step out from her antiquated privacy and away from her antiquated style of publicity too; they wanted her to join the New Britain in this new space, a space Di herself had done so much to cultivate, the way she fused premodern and postmodern forms of status, royalty and celebrity, so irresistibly into one figure, into one exalted, vulnerable, ruthlessly exposed life—yes, those InfoAge revolutionaries were forcing the queen into the kingdom that had

been ruled by the “People’s Princess,” there to share with all and sundry, not her power or her wealth, but her feelings, like everybody else.

There is no direct parallel, obviously, no one-to-one correspondence, between the mourning actors and Di’s funeral. But there’s that common element, something like a hue, a tone. And I detect traces of that element, more elusively embedded, whenever I watch the bereaved on TV, the relatives and victims of every sort of mishap and disaster—I suppose I’ve seen, how many thousands over the years? Tens? Hundreds? But I always wonder, as I watch them in the glow—some for a passing moment, others turning grief into a worthy cause, taking up residence, launching a second life—I always wonder: what is this *doing* to you?

And it isn’t just displays of grief that get enacted in this way. Take how athletes now celebrate themselves for scoring, for tackling, for making the play. And by extension, the way fans celebrate, not just the team or the victory, but themselves. There’s that same element, that same quality, in the way those exhilarated men position themselves in front of each other, or the larger audience and the cameras, beefy faces alight with a peculiar blend of exultation and hostility, tendons bulging in their necks, fists pounding the air or curled tightly upward at the ends of crook-dangling arms, bodies thrust forward as if to bulldoze past all compromise, apparently frenzied, apparently berserk, bellowing in tones suggestive of profound vindication, bellowing, “Yeaauh! Yeaauh! Yeaauh!” And each “Yeaauh” lifts above the preceding one, as if to reinforce it, but also to comment on it, even to parody it, and suddenly you realize, looking into their eyes, beaming out at friends and neighbors in the stands, you realize that this is also a performance, and a contest, a folk art—and oh so self-conscious after all.

And, by further extension, all the high-fiving and hissed-“Yes!”-pointing and thumbs-upping in the culture as a whole, in the continuous play of all the expressions and gestures that signify various degrees of, what shall we call it—triumphal intensity? The alchemy at work across that whole spectrum is, at bottom, just what we saw in grief over Di.

And that alchemy is today at work in every department of our experience.

This book traces modalities of that alchemy through the fabric of our lives, lives composed of an unprecedented fusion of the real and the represented, lives shaped by a culture of performance that constitutes a quality of being, a type of person—the mediated person.

So what made the difference? Why the emergence of that folk genre, the “where I was when the Event took place” story? Why *didn't* members of the Greatest Generation craft fables of their personal experiences of the Attack on America in 1941?

Because they weren't there, that's why. (There are other reasons too, but they are derivative, you'll see.) For starters, be assured that people who were physically at Pearl Harbor on the Day of Infamy *did* have stories of their personal experiences, and told them to each other, to reporters, in letters home—and repeated them as the years went by, be sure of that. Such stories are primal, anthropologically grounded. But people who just heard about Pearl Harbor on the radio and read about it in the papers didn't feel inclined to tell those stories because it didn't feel as if it had happened to them, personally, at all. At bottom, that's the difference. It's that simple.

One of the most popular public-service-type TV shows of the 1950s was *You Are There* (for reenactments of historical events).

The name sounds hokey now, because we take it for granted, but that was the original miracle of tele-vision. That's what blew the mind when it all began. Everyone became a participant/eyewitness to events on the world stage, past and present. And that's why people spontaneously told their stories about the Kennedy assassination, no matter where they were physically when it happened. They saw and heard it all unfold, not just on TV, of course—all the media were contributing, through every sensory channel—but TV was central, and Walter Cronkite was at the center of the center, and it was indeed as if you were there. Reams of coverage, endless coverage, amazing coverage—in a way *more* compelling than if you had been there physically, because virtually you were there from so many different perspectives. You weren't in one spot, the way you would have been if you were physically there, squashed behind a fat lady, looking in your purse for your sunglasses when the shots went off—you thought they were fireworks at first, until you heard the screaming. No, not like that: you were not there in one humble and limited spot; you were everywhere there, because that amazing coverage put you everywhere there, and more or less simultaneously to boot.

You had a sort of God's eye view.

This is a form of flattery so pervasive, so fundamental to the very nature of representation, that it has escaped notice, though it ultimately accounts for the much-remarked narcissism of our age. The flattered self is a mediated self, and the alchemy of mediation, the osmotic process through which reality and representation fuse, gets carried into our psyches by the irresistible flattery that goes with being incessantly addressed.

They say that the architecture and the landscaping at Versailles were originally designed to provide His Highness with various commanding vantage points, positions that made it seem

as if the whole world were spread out before him, naked to his gaze.

That's peanuts compared to what mediation makes possible for all of us today.

At the most general conceptual level, *mediation* means dealing with reality *through* something else. Marshall McLuhan, Godfather of Media Studies, thought of mechanical tools as media because, as artifacts that come between us and the given, they were “extensions of man,” and so could be said to “mediate” in a certain sense. But this isn't an academic treatise. In this book, *mediation* refers to arts and artifacts that represent, that communicate—but also, and especially, to their effects on the way we experience the world, and ourselves in it.

Back to the JFK coverage, to those media resources that were devoted, to an unprecedented extent, to your personal experience of a historic event as it unfolded—some of that coverage became instantly iconic, you will recall. And it remained iconic through the decades, fodder for a lineage of Oliver Stones, recycled, recontextualized, reinterpreted endlessly, all those iconic images that had originally been so personally yours, brought to you (as they used to say) by the tube, brought to you in that atmosphere of special intimacy that binds you to the screen in your private space, when you are fully absorbed, when you are really into it. Those bovine Texas lawmen, sweating and squirming under their Stetsons—you could smell the fear and resentment, so out of their depth, ineptitude exposed, the dangerous, aimless anger. Jackie's bloody dress. Johnson's slab of a hand upheld to take the oath, chaos in the aisle behind him; were the Russians up to something? Was that why they were so frantic to swear him in? Johnson's eyelids drooping so—was he hiding something, or was he just exhausted? What did that expression mean exactly? Maybe

nothing, maybe the camera just caught him in midblink. That happens sometimes; we all knew that because we were taking lots of pictures of ourselves by then. “Book depository,” “grassy knoll”—you were there. You were there when Ruby shot Oswald, live, and if not live, you saw it over and over again afterward, and you knew it was live.

Knew it *was* live? Knew it was live over and over again? Reflect on grammar for a moment. And bear in mind: grammar goes deep, and grammar shapes conception, even perception.

You were there, everywhere there, over and over again, and you knew, over and over again, that it was live, except, of course, later on, when it was sometimes a scrupulously accurate fictional depiction of what was live or, in many cases, a splicing together of what was in fact live with a possibly really distorted fictional depiction of what was live.

The flattery implicit in representation may be irresistible, but it requires syntax torture, verging on logical contradiction, to describe the paradoxical conditions of life in a flood of imagery. The tangle of syntax gets so intricate it melts into a semantic blob (of which more anon). Saturation is partly responsible, but it only begins to tell the tale. It’s not just our environment. Our minds are, as a matter of sheer quantitative fact, stocked with mediated entities too. Ask yourself: is there anything you do that remains essentially unmediated, anything you don’t experience reflexively through some commodified representation of it? Birth? Marriage? Illness? Think of all the movies and memoirs, philosophies and techniques, self-help books, counselors, programs, presentations, workshops. Think of the fashionable vocabularies generated by those venues, and think of how all this conditions your experience. Ask yourself: if I were to strip away all those influences, could I conceive of my life?

Of course, for most of us there are still a few things that are just what they are. Maybe you still buy pencils or paper clips just to use, and not because of what they represent, what they say about you. Maybe you have a nice little relationship with your feet, rubbing them together under the blankets or picking at a callus on your toe. A few things. Precious few.

What it comes down to is this: Di's mourners were truly grieving *and* they were performing. Immersed in a world continuously represented from every angle, they understood Di's death as an opportunity to play a significant role in it, to represent themselves at levels of prominence usually reserved for the celebrated. But they already knew how to *be* representational.

That's because the same dynamic operates in anonymous daily lives. For example, let's say you've been in marital therapy. Let's say it was successful. Maybe group therapy, with role playing. Let's say you learned techniques in that therapy and from books, techniques for keeping channels of communication open, for owning your behavior, for constructive arguing. And you applied them, with your partner, and it saved your marriage, let's say, and that's a good thing, no question. But it is also a very mediated thing.

It's no accident that therapeutic techniques in general are so akin to the Method developed at the Actors Studio. Getting in touch with your feelings is the aim in both settings. And getting in touch with your feelings is a reflexive process that transforms the immediate into the mediated. You learn, through that process, how to have your feelings, how to express your feelings—which means: how to perform them.

So there is a self-consciousness, a reflexivity about you that makes your parents or grandparents look like automatons by comparison. Wonderful people they are, or may have been, but

compared to you—utterly without perspective on themselves. And that puts you on the continuum with Di’s mourners. We are all method actors now.

If the marital therapy example doesn’t work for you, read on. The mediated world is capacious. Its middle names are *Diverse* and *Inclusive*. There’s room for everybody and everything.

But remember. The issue is no longer representation versus reality, phony versus authentic, artificial versus natural. That was for nineteenth-century Romantics to worry about. A few existentialists and a bunch of hippies tried to revive those concerns in the twentieth century, but we know what happened to them. We’ve read the books, heard the music, seen the movies—and the remakes. But there is no going back to reality just as there is no going back to virginity. We have been consigned to a new plane of being engendered by mediating representations of fabulous quality and inescapable ubiquity, a place where everything is addressed to us, everything is for us, and nothing is beyond us anymore.

CHAPTER 1

*Intimations of your real place in the great scheme of things. Whatever. It's all about options—and they are all about you. No limits. You are totally free to choose because it doesn't really matter what you choose. **Learning to love the Blob.** Deconstruction and shopping (not buying, just shopping; maybe leasing).*

Recalling the Real

ALMOST NOTHING, anyway.

Say your car breaks down in the middle of nowhere—the middle of Saskatchewan, say. You have no radio, no cell phone, nothing to read, no gear to fiddle with. You just have to wait. Pretty soon you notice how everything around you just happens to be there. And it just happens to be there in this very precise but unfamiliar way. You are *so* not used to this. Every tuft of weed, the scattered pebbles, the lapsing fence, the cracks in the asphalt, the buzz of insects in the field, the flow of cloud against the sky, everything is very specifically exactly the way it is—and none of it is for you. Nothing here was designed to affect you. It isn't arranged so that you can experience it, you didn't plan to experience it, there isn't any screen, there isn't any display, there isn't any entrance, no brochure, nothing special to look at, no dramatic scenery or wildlife, no tour guide, no campsites, no benches, no paths, no viewing platforms with natural-historical information posted under slanted Plexiglas lectern things—whatever is there is just there, and so are you. And your options are

limited. You begin to get a sense of your real place in the great scheme of things.

Very small.

Some people find this profoundly comforting. Wittgenstein, for example.

So that's a baseline for comparison. What it teaches us is this: in a mediated world, the opposite of real isn't phony or illusional or fictional—it's optional. Idiomatically, we recognize this when we say, "The reality is . . . ," meaning something that has to be dealt with, something that isn't an option. We are most free of mediation, we are most real, when we are at the disposal of accident and necessity. That's when we are not being addressed. That's when we go without the flattery intrinsic to representation.

Surfing the Options

But haven't things in people's lives always carried some message? Hasn't culture always filtered reality in some way and addressed people through representations of some kind—ranging from the categories built into a particular language to, say, symbolic insignia of rank and affiliation?

Sure. But *being aware of that* is new. This crucial point must be grasped and retained. Awareness of "culture" was once the prerogative of a very few reflective individuals. In the postmodern world it is common sense. In that awareness, the ethos of mediation is established. Academics express all this in a jargon about the social construction of race and gender—and of truth and value in general. But mediated people everywhere know that identity and lifestyle are constructs, something to *have*. The objects and places and mannerisms that constitute our life-world are *intentionally* representational. What cultures traditionally provided was taken-for-granted custom, a form

Learning to Love the Blob

of necessity—hence of reality. Options are profoundly, if subtly, different, and so are the people who live among and through them.

And this holds even if you never exercise those options, even if you cling to some tradition. You know you *could* be different, and so, perhaps, you cling more desperately. Fanaticisms flourish in an atmosphere of unlimited choice.

But most people are cool with it. At least in the blue states. And Europe.