

“Real” and Its Limitations

by [Wyntner Woody](#) (September 2015)

Tell me, have you ever been a 16th century Scottish king?

“Real,” as used in the U.S., is a style of expression actors hear a lot about these days. It is what we are most often asked to perform. The theory behind it, ostensibly, is that a re-enactment of the mundane, drawing upon subjective experience, conveys genuineness: *trompe l’oeil*. “Real” proves useful as a tool in one’s kitbag, when applied judiciously, in some commercial work and in the genre of Realism.

In short: look left and right, up and down, and in response ascribe a corresponding emotion you have felt in a corresponding episode of your non-dramatic life and overlay it upon the character. Thus created, a simulation of life itself, incorporating remembered emotion once perhaps felt by the actor, thus seeming genuine. To whom? To all, its purveyors assume.

Anyone who has lived sensitively is aware, if even in a shadowy consciousness, that there is much more to Life than our routine human transactions and their associated “emotions” of the moment. There is more than just “Me” in reaction to stimulus.

What “Real” dares not to touch is meaning: meaning that lies beyond the immediacy of subjective material existence. “Real” is not real: it is a deflation of Life. We, as actors, as audience as well – at least some of us – know that something essential is missing. Its limitations suffocate. The oxygen of theatrical imagination is essential for abundant dramatic life.

“Real” constrains the actor’s larger theatrical imagination by compelling him to abandon the subtle understandings and essential mysteries for which he has no basis but his intuition. “Real” compels him to limit his expression of the Truth of the character he plays to the barest four walls. And, frankly, not even these belong wholly to him, even though he is instructed to plumb the depths of his psyche (whatever that is), for they represent a breathtaking assumption: that is there is no Truth.

Make no bones about it. “Real” is an assertion: the only reality is that which one has subjectively and immediately witnessed and to which, in counter-action, one has emoted a reaction. “This is all there is.” The result: a tawdry dullness that permeates American aesthetic work.

By extension, the “Real” style assumes that we are all fundamentally alike – flattened equivalencies – and inheres as well in a presumed audience. A presumed audience presumed to be uniformly unimaginative, insensitive, unintelligent: capable of recognizing, comprehending, only the barest minimum. If you have read this far, you have, in fact, disproved this presumption.

But more importantly, the widespread adoption of the “Real” style has whittled the breadth of Theater from a living, ancient oak to a mere plank. The reduction to mediocrity diminishes the inherent worth of Theater in its grandest sense. Who wants pyrite when you could have gold?

When we avoid the “Real” style, characters become what they have traditionally been in the West: theatrical constructs of ideas grander than us mere mortals. The Greeks understood these Ideas, these Forces underlying the motivations of the Universe as expressed through our Humanity. Two millenia after they were written, these theatrical works remain True.

The grandeur of these Ideas is most evident in the opera. I

had read of “*katharsis*” in Greek tragedy as a teenager, but it wasn’t until I saw Alan Held – a truly great singing actor (and an American) – sing *Wozzeck* that I first experienced it. It engenders within one a potential – rich, life-affirming, even life-changing – that “Real” can never, ever create.

Americans are eminently capable of work at this high level. Well-known examples abound: Glenn Close, Matt Dillon, Edie Falco, Mickey Rourke. I do not personally know these actors and their theatrical intentions, but each has gone beyond the “Real” style in certain roles. I know actors not well-known but as capable. My point is that, famous or not, American actors are rarely asked to be “unReal.”

We ought to trust in our Tradition. I trust it implicitly because it has proven its worth. But the past 50 years has seen a deterioration in the quality of American aesthetic life analogous to those concrete buildings that languished to the east of the Berlin Wall. We need invigoration. I write with a grain of excitement: I am a witness to pockets in this country turning back towards the Tradition for nourishment. But even a strong seedling must withstand the vagaries of weather.

From the miniscule soapbox on which I stand in the corner of an obscure park in the center of town, I call on the like-minded: our task is to foster, wherever possible, the aesthetic Tradition that thrived before 1968. I see some younger people eagerly reaching to Tradition for sustenance, adopting it and making it their own. It is essential in this era of ever lowering standards to move away from “Real” as the all-encompassing style and to relegate its usefulness: to commercial work and to the (limited) genre of Realism. There is no longer anywhere to go but up. That is where, I think, I hope, we shall go.

I offer two admirable films to elucidate the stylistic variety mentioned above. Watch Fassbinder’s [*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*](#) (1972) and you will see exquisitely choreographed and

natural acting that entirely avoids the “Real.” Watch Cassavetes’s [*Opening Night*](#) (1977) for Realism in acting of very high caliber.

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