

# **Meisner Across Paradigms: The Phenomenal Dynamic of Sanford Meisner's Technique of Acting and its Resonances with Postmodern Performance.**

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# Abstract:

The Meisner Technique emerged as a part of the realist, modern theatre of the early-Twentieth Century and extended its influence through the rest of that century, including the 1960s and 1970s when there was an explosion of various forms of postmodern performance. This work will demonstrate that while Meisner's Technique is a part of the paradigm of modern, realist theatre, it simultaneously challenges this ideology with disruptive processes of the sort that postmodern performance instigates. It is the thesis of this work that the Meisner Technique operates according to a set of phenomenologically-aligned imperatives that create strong resonances with certain forms of postmodern performance. This establishes the dynamic wherein the Meisner Technique is able to enter into discourse with instances of the postmodern paradigm of performance.

In the first three chapters I will conduct in-depth analyses of Meisner actors' relationships with their environment, their fellow performers, and their actions from a range of phenomenological perspectives. In the fourth chapter I will apply the conclusions of these analyses to the operation of the Meisner Technique within the paradigm of modern, realist theatre. In the fifth chapter I will set a backdrop to the postmodern field and suggest the issues from this tradition with which the Meisner Technique might resonate. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight each take one example of an artist from the postmodern field, Richard Foreman, Michael Kirby, and Robert Wilson respectively, establishes their own particular context, and suggests those processes relating to acting/performing technique that might provoke the most productive exchanges. This juxtaposition suggests the places between the practices where discourse might take root and suggests the beginnings of such dialogues.

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# Introduction

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*'The actor must not annihilate the deeper intentions of the play which the playwright has written.'*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 191)

*'The text is your greatest enemy.'*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 137)

The Meisner Technique emerged as a part of the realist, modern theatre of the early-Twentieth Century and extended its influence through the rest of that century, including the 1960s and 1970s when there was an explosion of various forms of postmodern performance. This work will demonstrate that while Meisner's Technique is a part of the paradigm of modern, realist theatre, it simultaneously challenges this ideology with disruptive processes of the sort that postmodern performance instigates. It is the thesis of this work that the Meisner Technique operates according to a set of phenomenologically-aligned imperatives that create strong resonances with certain forms of postmodern performance. This establishes the dynamic wherein the Meisner Technique is able to enter into discourse with instances of the postmodern paradigm of performance.

Historically, the Meisner Technique is a close descendent of Strasberg's Method Acting that is firmly rooted within modern, realist theatre. The Method's dominance in American theatre from the 1930s for the majority of the century is widely recognised (Schmitt, 1990: 93), and is the cause for much of the criticism it attracts (Krasner, 2000: 6-7). Meisner's place as a founding member of The Group Theatre, where this acting methodology was developed, put him at the centre of the American Theatre in the 1930s and supplied him with the experience and the credentials necessary to develop his own Technique for training actors. As David Krasner notes, the paradigm of modern, realist theatre resonated with an American desire for authenticity, as opposed to the 'deception' that more stylistically ornate forms of theatre were

seen to support (Krasner, 2000: 25). Value was attached to authenticity because of a number of cultural factors. The increasing cultural diversity of America at the time made it necessary to seek forms of expression that appeared to be accessible to all (Krasner, 2000: 26). The pursuit of capitalist enterprise encouraged personal freedom and resulted in a celebration of the individualistic gratification that its rewards facilitated (*ibid*). An increased fascination with psychoanalysis promised access to the inner truths of individuals' psyches and to reveal 'authentic selves' that could be taken as a truthful foundation of behaviour (Krasner, 2000: 27). In this climate, the authentic behaviour that Stanislavsky seemed to exhibit in the Moscow Arts Theatre tours of 1922 and 1923 was welcomed with open arms by American audiences.

The Method derived much of its credibility from its claims to be an American interpretation of The System that Stanislavsky developed in the Moscow Arts Theatre and thus an inheritor of the authentic behaviour Stanislavsky fostered. The history of Stanislavsky's influence on American Theatre has been well established, but is worth restating here insofar as it establishes Meisner's centrality to the paradigm of modern, realist theatre.

The relish with which American theatre practitioners embraced Stanislavsky's principles is detectable in Strasberg's assertion that, 'The Stanislavski "System" is ... no continuation of the textbooks of the past or present. It represents a sharp break with traditional teaching and a return to actual theatre experience' (Strasberg, 1947: 16). Working in The Moscow Arts Theatre at the turn of the Twentieth Century, Stanislavsky formalised the acting craft he practiced and taught into what became known as The System. The terrain of American theatre was irrevocably altered by The Moscow Arts Theatre's two acclaimed tours of the United States in 1922 and 1923. Boleslavsky and Ouspenskaya from this troupe relocated to New York in 1924 and founded The Acting Laboratory where they passed their version of Stanislavsky's system on to Sanford Meisner, Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg (Gray, 1964: 28). Stanislavsky's first acting manual, *An Actor Prepares*, was not translated into English until

1936, twelve years after The Acting Laboratory's first classes (Gray, 1964: 38) and so it was an earlier understanding of Stanislavsky's System, frozen at the time of the American tours and transmitted from teacher to student that went on to influence The Group Theatre and therefore Strasberg's Method Acting and Meisner's Technique.

In order to avoid perpetuating misunderstandings about Stanislavsky, it is necessary to make clear here that Stanislavsky's work was not confined to the body of work that Strasberg (mis)interpreted as The Method. As Carnicke asserts,

*the transmission of Stanislavsky's ideas to the U.S., their linguistic and cultural translation, and their transformation by the Method created a pervasive veil of assumptions through which we in the West commonly view Stanislavsky. While this filter has illuminated some of the System's premises (most notably those that involve psychological realism), it has also obscured others (such as those drawn from Symbolism, Formalism, and Yoga).*

(Carnicke, 2009: 7)

Not only did Method Acting highlight those parts of Stanislavsky's work that were most applicable to modern, realist theatre, but there were many phases of work that Stanislavsky embarked on later in his career that took place after The Method was devised and were therefore not incorporated within it. As well as the Symbolism, Formalism, and Yoga mentioned by Carnicke above, Stanislavsky later notably worked with Gogol, Moliere, and Shakespeare. Carnicke attributes this to the fact that Stanislavsky, 'had always feared being associated with only one theatrical style--psychological Realism. While it had been the style in which he had most productively directed, he wished to protect his System from such a limiting association' (Carnicke, 2009: 190). Additionally to these projects, Stanislavsky's later process of Active Analysis was not a part of his System at the time of the Method's creation and was therefore not included within it. However, because of the particular ways that Stanislavsky's work was transmitted to the United States it matters less for this work how Stanislavsky's work evolved over his career than the understanding of it gained by those American practitioners who were influenced by it. It is for this reason that the mis-understood version of The System

that was taken as the basis of The Method is more important to this work than the more accurate interpretation of it that we now have access to.

Lee Strasberg took charge of actor training in The Group Theatre and led them in a country retreat where they sought to develop themselves into an ensemble modelled after the Moscow Arts Theatre (Clurman, 1957: 36). Strasberg used some of Stanislavsky's exercises, in particular 'affective memory', and put the emphasis on the 'sincere' portrayal of emotion on stage. Harold Clurman evokes the cult-like reverence Strasberg had for these exercises in his memoires:

*Strasberg was a fanatic on the subject of true emotion. Everything was secondary to it. He sought it with the patience of an inquisitor, he was outraged by trick substitutes, and when he had succeeded in stimulating it, he husbanded it, fed it, and protected it. Here was something new to most of the actors, something basic, something almost holy. It was revelation in the theatre; and Strasberg was its prophet.*

(Clurman, 1957: 41)

Strasberg's training, that later became known as The Method, was not so much a direct translation of Stanislavsky's System as a reinterpretation of it in a new context (Harrop, 1992: 39).

The Group Theatre also developed a very particular culture by deliberately isolating itself from the wider theatre world of the time. The summer retreat is the clearest example of this self-imposed separation, but it also formed part of the self-image Group members cultivated. Clurman says that the name, 'The Group Theatre' came about organically because of their habit of referring to themselves as, 'Our Group' (Brennan-Gibson, 1981: 166). Seeing themselves as distinct from the rest of the theatre world encouraged The Group to focus inward on their own project rather than outwards towards the work of their peers. Strasberg fanatically pushed his actors towards 'true emotion' without the scripts to completely support these experiments, but with tools appropriated from Stanislavsky's System. Furthermore this volatile quest was conducted during a country retreat where all the participants were cut off from outside influences and later during an intellectual and cultural discipline of separation.

Meisner was later to criticise the improvisations that he participated in within this environment as being only ‘intellectual nonsense’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 36) and his rebellion against Strasberg’s authority may have had its beginnings in this hermetically sealed and introverted situation.

Sanford Meisner began to teach at The Neighbourhood Playhouse in 1935, nearly half-way through the Group Theatre’s ten-year existence (1931-1941). Although he acknowledges that the first years of his teaching were largely derivative of what he had learnt from Boleslavsky, Ouspenskaya and Strasberg, he quickly found a way to invest his classes with his own personality and convictions about actor training (Doob, 1985: 16:20). The first target of this change in direction was the ‘intellectualism’ that he believed strangled the Group Theatre improvisations (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 36). He cut the abstract concept of character entirely out of his actors’ vocabulary and concentrated instead on how to make the actor react impulsively to their environment. The germ of this approach is also apparent in the Group’s productions of *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing* that Meisner played a significant role in. Morris Carnovsky recalls a particularly Meisner-esque revelation from the run of *Awake and Sing*: “All I know is, that is Stella.” So I said to myself, “I’m going to relate to her today, Morris to Stella”. It did an extraordinary thing for me’ (Carnovsky in Natanson, 1966: 330). This is a similar approach to Meisner’s removal of character and his insistence that his students act as themselves. For example, in the very earliest observation exercises (to which I will return to in Chapter One) Meisner expresses Morris’ sentiment in an exchange with one of his students:

“Are you talking to me now, or is Lady Macbeth talking?”  
“I’m talking to you.”  
“That’s you. That’s you in person. Your observation was straight, unadulterated observation. What you observed, you observed, not a character in a play.”

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 19-20)

Crucially, Meisner’s role as a founding member of The Group Theatre, his early association with Harold Clurman and Lee Strasberg in the Acting Laboratory classes, and his active role in the Group Theatre productions as well as those projects that were devised with other Group

members puts Meisner at the centre of the theatrical paradigm that went on to dominate American theatre during the Twentieth Century. His appointment as a teacher at The Neighborhood Playhouse then gave him the environment in which he was able to solidify his own version of actor training that was his primary contribution to Twentieth Century theatre.

Meisner's contribution to the modern, realist paradigm of theatre is recognised by many prominent practitioners. For example, David Mamet recalls that Meisner was,

*'One of the first authentic people that I, and most of us had ever met in our lives. And of course he was autocratic about ... those things he believed in, because he knew them to be the truth. And we knew we were being exposed to the truth, that is to something that was absolutely practicable and which absolutely worked, and which we wanted desperately to learn.'*

(Mamet in Doob, 1985: 1:40).

Eli Wallach claimed that it is, 'what Meisner was able to do diagnostically [that] is what's so brilliant about him. He takes you down to a certain level, and then slowly, with these exercises, builds you up to a confidence so that you are a craftsman' (Wallach in Doob, 1985: 10:30). Gregory Peck points to a second generation of influence that Meisner instigated through, 'the number of actors who have come out of [Meisner's classes] over a forty-year period who have gone on to become people who set the standard of acting themselves and changed a great deal about American acting' (Peck in Doob, 1985: 47:59).

Half a world away and most of a century later from when Meisner took up his post in the Neighborhood Playhouse, I encountered the Meisner Technique as I embarked on my acting career in Auckland, New Zealand in 2005. I had just performed in a collection of my short plays and earned myself an agent, an audition for the prestigious Auckland Theatre Company, but most significantly for the future direction of my career was the phone number conspiratorially slipped to me by a fellow cast member. It belonged to somebody called Michael Saccente, and Paul Paice, my acting partner said simply, 'He teaches Meisner. It'd be good for you. Give him a call.'

The feeling of being invited into a secret society of 'real actors' wasn't unique to me. As I met my thirteen classmates at a community centre rehearsal space in our weekly classes with Michael over the following two years, the sense that we were part of something special, secret, and revelatory was shared by us all. This cult-like atmosphere, intensified by the way that prospective students were approached by Michael's alumni and invited to contact him individually (the classes were not promoted in any other way) set a level of expectation amongst us that might have proven hard to meet. The religious language that I employ here is not accidental, but used deliberately to capture the atmosphere of the classroom, and is an element of the experience that I will return to below.

As we progressed through Repetition, planned and executed our Independent Activities, emotionally prepared, and picked up our scripts, the dynamic of the performers, the striking qualities of the spontaneous physicality and the psychic and emotional depth that ran beneath some of the performances transfixed us and spurred us on to greater efforts.

Throughout the two years and despite participating in some truly memorable scenes, the results were achieved by following the principles that Meisner had taught Michael and that he passed on to us every week like previous jewels. The principles were simple, but maddeningly elusive in practice and they were drilled into us repetitively and relentlessly until they took on the pervasiveness and constancy of mantras:

'The foundation of acting is the reality of doing.'

'Don't do anything until something happens to make you do it.'

'What you do doesn't depend on you; it depends on the other fellow.'

'Silence is an absence of words, but never an absence of meaning.'

'The text is your greatest enemy.'

'Be Specific.'

'An ounce of behaviour is worth a pound of words.'

However, it is also the case that some days the 'magic' did not work. Following the same axioms and engaging with the same tasks as the previous week sometimes produced limp, disconnected behaviour. It may have been a fragile grasp on a particular principle, a personal shift in the chemistry between the actors, or even that the weather was gloomier on that particular day, but on most occasions I was not able to understand where things had gone wrong.

It is true that Meisner rejected over-thinking in his classroom, and Michael was adamant that we forget the failures and just try again next time. This resistance to introspection and analysis was taken up as one of the key doctrines of the 'cult of Meisner'. It became clear over the two years that we were undergoing an instinctive orientation to our work, and that an objective, rational understanding of this process would distance us from a full engagement with it. Over the years that have followed, as I applied the principles to the diverse demands that any working actor is subject to, it was clear that this instinctive handle on the work was effective in many situations, but in others the Technique seemed to slip through my fingers, forcing me to fall back on other methods and techniques to achieve the desired performance. Again, the same frustration remained – I never knew when it would work or when it would fail. Throughout this period of work, my desire to cut through the mystical, quasi-religious faith in the Technique and to understand how it operated at a more practical and mechanical level continued to grow.

As I continued to work and study my craft I discovered that other practitioners had found tools to get a methodological grasp on their work without disturbing the instinctive, intuitive engagement they sought in the moment of performance. Many of these tools were derived from the phenomenological tradition, and from the embodied perspective of Merleau-Ponty in particular. I began to see that I might similarly be able to gain a methodical understanding of the processes underpinning the Meisner Technique through the subjective philosophy of

phenomenology rather than the objective rationality that I had always believed was the only option for such a study.

As I began to think of my Meisner practice in these terms I was also coming into contact with performance artists and postmodern practitioners who were engaged in similar, non-rational, methodical interrogations of their work. Although my previous work was not confined to the paradigm of modern, realist theatre that Meisner was engaged in (it could more accurately be described as fluctuating between realism and self-consciously theatrical variety performance) as I now worked on these intentionally postmodern projects, I found that there were the beginnings of a shared language already there in our work and that many of our concerns, attitudes, and desires coincided. It was therefore a surprise to me when some of my collaborators, upon discovering my background in Meisner, intentionally put distance between the processes of our respective crafts where before there had been only shared work.

It was at this point that I realised that although a phenomenological interrogation of certain processes within Meisner's Technique might only be of interest to a particular audience, by pointing to some of the bridges that I had found between this acting method and particular strands of postmodern performance I might suggest synergies that such approaches have when put into dialogue with one another. This is not to say that the practices are the same, or that they are able to be fit together into a grand, universal approach to performance, but to say that both traditions can be invigorated by a relationship of exchange and discourse rather than one of adversarial suspicion.

As to the perspective from which the Meisner Technique arose, there are significant traces within it of the paradigm of modern, realist theatre. The Technique consists of a series of practical steps through which the actor can portray the 'deeper intentions of the ... playwright' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 191) on the stage for the passive reception of an audience. Meisner's references to Freud when discussing the actor's emotional life (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 84-5), together with his emphasis on the 'impulses' of the actor (Meisner and

Longwell, 1987: 36) indicate a belief in the ‘essential self’ of the actor. Both the quest to represent the intentions of the playwright as directly as possible and the use of the ‘essential self’ of the actor to achieve this show us that Meisner is working in accordance with modernist principles. Specifically, through the Meisner Technique, artworks are created through the invocation of the author’s intentions and the actor’s self as centres of meaning. Furthermore, these centres of meaning are treated as the essential characteristics of the medium that allow self-sufficient artworks to be created.

Fundamentally, it is Meisner’s choice of scenes that indicates the particular paradigm of theatre that he is intent on creating. When he first distributes scripts to his class, he tells the students that they are from ‘old-fashioned’ plays (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 61) and that they all address, ‘a compelling human problem’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 67). This ‘compelling human problem’ is what modern, realist theatre, as exemplified by Anton Chekhov and Arthur Miller (two of the authors whose work Meisner used in his classroom (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 252)), seeks to present. It is unified, realistic, psychological drama, and this is what Meisner directly coaches his students to actualise. This is best demonstrated in the final pages of *Sanford Meisner On Acting* entitled, ‘Final Scenes’, that consists of realist texts and transcripts of his instructions of how to apply the Technique to them through textual analysis. I will return to a close examination of these exchanges in Chapter Four where I discuss the application of the Meisner Technique to modern, realist texts. It is worth bearing in mind that Meisner did not see that his technique was confined to such texts, pointing to the non-realist texts he directed at the Neighborhood Playhouse (Meisner in Shepherd, 1977: 39).

Meisner published only one book during his lifetime that was simply called, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. Within the introduction to this book, he hints at two earlier attempts to set his Technique in print. The first only came to two chapters that he abandoned because he did not understand them upon rereading. The second was never published, primarily because it lacked, ‘the drama inherent in our interaction’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: xviii). By way of

explanation, he notes that, ‘the confessional mode is impossible to sustain at length in the theater, which is an arena where human personalities interlock in the reality of doing’ (*ibid*). Meisner’s analysis of the failure of his two earlier attempts of writing about his Technique suggests that the form of *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, a partly constructed narrative description of a year in one of his classes based upon recordings of his teaching and edited and embellished by Dennis Longwell and Meisner himself, is chosen deliberately and is necessary to successfully convey the Technique. There are of course powerful echoes of Stanislavsky’s choice to describe his System through a narrative account of a fictional classroom in which he is represented by the constructed persona, Tortsov. The major difference between the two writers’ forms is that Meisner does away with the persona, representing himself under his own name, something that the method of working from video recordings of his class might have made a more obvious choice.

However, it should not be assumed that Meisner is simply aping the Russian, to whom he acknowledges a great debt (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 137). The failure of the first two books that he claims to either have not understood upon rereading, or that failed to make, ‘sufficiently apparent’, how he was able to, ‘uniquely transmit my ideas’, points to a much more powerful imperative for the form the book took. This suggests that the Meisner Technique exists not only in the principles that underpin it, but also in the way those principles are imparted. This suggestion is strengthened by the divergence of the way his Technique is taught by his successors (Shirley, 2010: 210). From this we can conclude that it is not just the principles (or the content) of the Technique that is important, but also the larger situation in which those principles are transmitted. This is the major reason that I have adopted a phenomenological approach to the Technique, and I will elaborate further on the reasons for this methodological decision below.

Associated with *Sanford Meisner on Acting* are two audio-visual resources. *Sanford Meisner: Theater’s Best Kept Secret* is a documentary made for broadcast in 1985, including excerpts

from Meisner's classes, the transcripts of which Meisner's book was partly drawn from (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: ix). *Sanford Meisner: Masterclass* is a 2006 DVD release from The Sanford Meisner Centre in Los Angeles that includes eight hours of Meisner's teaching that Sydney Pollack and other alumni of Meisner's classes engineered to have recorded for posterity around the time that the aforementioned documentary was filmed. These two resources are invaluable for anyone attempting to come to terms with the Meisner Technique because they both contain audio-visual documentation of Meisner teaching and therefore capture not only the principles that he imparts, but his unique manner of transmitting these. Given my argument for the phenomenological interpretation of the Technique (that I shall make more fully below) both of these aspects of Meisner's teaching must be examined if we hope to come to a full understanding of the Technique.

It is necessary to add a pre-emptory note here about my prioritisation of sources about the Meisner Technique. Firstly, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, *Sanford Meisner: Theater's Best Kept Secret*, and, *Sanford Meisner: Masterclass*, are the only sources that show us the two aspects of the Meisner Technique (the principles and the way that Meisner transmitted these) operating in concert. In order to conduct the phenomenological analysis of the Technique that I propose, these must therefore be treated with special attention. Out of these sources, the considerable weight of my evidence will be drawn from *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, and when the origin and nature of these sources is taken into consideration, this is not surprising. *Sanford Meisner* is the distillation of an entire year's teaching by Sanford Meisner and is therefore able to select situations, exercises, and conversations that most ably convey the working of the technique. *Masterclass*, while incredibly useful, does not start with such a wide base of material. This DVD is closer to raw material, with added interview excerpts with Martin Barter of the Los Angeles Sanford Meisner Centre, and is a direct reproduction of eight hours' teaching. *Sanford Meisner: Theatre's Best Kept Secret*, on the other hand is a very different type of source, seeking to establish the context of Sanford Meisner himself, and therefore devotes a relatively small proportion of its time to the operation of the Technique.

The biggest pitfall of giving so much weight to *Sanford Meisner on Acting* is the potential for this work to appear as a modernist inquiry into the ‘authentic practice’ of one man as opposed to the analysis of the working processes of the Technique. However, my particular focus on this source should not be taken as evidence of a hidden modernist mind-set, but as the invocation of a particular narrative within the plurality of narratives that now surround the Meisner Technique. By using the account of the Technique that Meisner himself authorised, I am not attempting to lay claim to any special authority or truth that he may personally have had access to. Rather, I am putting a particularly powerful symbol of this tradition into play with the phenomenology that I apply to it and the similarly weighty figures of postmodern performance that I am suggesting connections with. There is no question of discovering a truth that may lie hidden in the secret intentions of any of these practitioners, but neither should we be afraid to invoke their names and works in our studies as if they were somehow sacred figures that must not be dissected through critical discussion. As a precedent of this approach, Freddie Rokem’s recent book, *Philosophers and Thespians*, presents the intersection between philosophy and performance as a succession of encounters between figures that have traditionally been seen as key to both disciplines. In my work I am locating the processes of the Meisner Technique in a phenomenological matrix and using the loaded symbols of Sanford Meisner, John Cage, Michael Kirby, Robert Wilson, and Richard Foreman not as centres of meaning, but as suggestive of the direction from which certain perspectives and practices emanate. The centre of my investigation is not any one of these figures, but the landscape between them that I am casting a phenomenological light upon.

In addition to the ‘primary’ sources that I describe above, there are three interviews with Meisner that have been published. While allowing Meisner to respond directly to the questions posed by interviewers about acting, they do not include the direct records of his teaching that the ‘primary’ sources do. These are, ‘The Reality of Doing’, from the Tulane Drama Review in 1964, ‘Looking Back: 1974-1976’, from *Educational Theatre Journal* (1976), and ‘Sanford Meisner’, from *Yale/Theater* in 1977. While not direct classroom records, these

provide some very interesting comments from Meisner that help to place his work into context.

While not receiving the same attention as Lee Strasberg's Method Acting, there are a number of additional sources, including a small body of critical work, surrounding the Technique that Meisner created at The Neighbourhood Playhouse. A particularly useful resource is Scott Williams' 2001 workshop on Meisner's Repetition exercise that is housed in the Exeter Digital Archives. In this Scott takes a group of students through the various levels of Meisner's Repetition exercise, introduces them to Emotional Preparation, and briefly discusses how the Technique is applied through textual analysis. There is some very enlightening discussion of the mechanics of the Technique, and interestingly Williams relates the Repetition exercise to the process of isolation within dance training. He says that in the Repetition Exercise, 'you're isolating the actor's muscles. The first muscle is the reading muscle. ... And secondly it's working the muscle of response -- the impulsive response to it' (Williams, 2001: 22.15). As a practical workshop, the language slips into an essentialist discussion that refers to the 'self' of the actor and 'truthful' behaviour, and I shall return to the problematics of such a discourse for the discussion of Meisner's Technique later in this work.

Larry Silverberg's 1994 book, *The Sanford Meisner Approach: An Actor's Workbook*, veers even further into the territory of the practical handbook that relies upon slightly vague, essentialist language in order to create its desired effect. For example, in summary of the lessons contained in the book, Silverberg says that they have been working on,

*'True listening, working from your instinct rather than your head, living fully in the moment, your openness and availability to your partners and to yourself, really doing rather than pretending to do and your ability to bring a deep personal meaning to your work. Listen, these skills we have been working on are essential. Without them, acting cannot occur.'*

(Silverberg, 1994: 149).

Such language, while possibly effective at a practical level in order to train actors to work in a particular way, draws upon many loaded concepts such as, 'true listening', 'living fully in the

moment', and 'working from your instinct', that are never pinned down. Such use of unexamined terminology exacerbates the issues that I found through my own training in the Technique, where certain elements are taken to be self-evidently true and not appropriate targets for further analysis. While Meisner himself talks in these terms in *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, Nick Doob's documentary, and *Masterclass*, in these instances the language is balanced by the practical application of it that creates bridges between the metaphorical language and the reality of doing it. Also, as Meisner says, these sources show how, 'human personalities interlock in the reality of doing' in his teaching (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: xviii).

William Esper's 2008 acting manual, *The Actor's Art and Craft: William Esper Teaches the Meisner Technique*, is another work in the vein, that, while providing an excellent practical introduction to the Technique, does not further illuminate the mechanics of its operation in the manner that this, more academic, project intends to. There is a clue in Esper's title, that he recognises the effect that a different teacher has on the Technique itself. While it claims to be a representation of the Meisner Technique, it is prefaced by the fact that it is William Esper teaching it and the fact that this is significant enough to include in the title of the work alludes to the fact that it is not just the principles of the Technique that matter, but crucially, the way these principles are imparted.

Mel Gordon's work, *Stanislavsky in America: An Actor's Workbook*, comes closer to balancing the practical description of the Technique with critical analysis. While coming from the perspective of Stanislavsky's legacy in America, he is able to usefully illuminate aspects of Meisner's historical context and some of the differences that distinguished him from other teachers within this narrative. Uniquely to Gordon's work is the assertion that it was while working in Hollywood in 1959 that Meisner perfected his Repetition exercise (Gordon, 2010: 180). Gordon shows uncommon sensitivity to the underlying imperatives of the Technique, noting, for instance that, 'Acting, for [Meisner], had to be linked to the performer's unique persona and his or her direct responses to their scenic environment and immediate conflicts'

(Gordon, 2010: 176). As we shall see throughout this work, and in Chapter One, ‘Observation’, in particular, Gordon’s statement here is very suggestive of the phenomenological analysis that I am employing, an approach that I would argue is particularly well-suited to analysing the Technique as a holistic process of orientating students towards their environment in specific ways. The necessity of such a broad approach becomes apparent from a comparison between Gordon’s summary of Meisner’s exercises and Meisner’s own book. In the case of Gordon’s book (and intentionally built into its structure), the exercises are removed from the context of the classroom in which they are taught and come across as simple, repeatable exercises that could be practiced by anybody. Serious attention to the apparent contradictions within Meisner’s own directions to his students and the difficulty of performing these exercises to the teacher’s satisfaction show that the Technique is not as straightforward as Gordon’s distillation would imply. While Gordon’s book is a great step forward in the scholarship of ‘Method Acting’ in America, including Meisner’s Technique, it can only be of limited use for the kind of phenomenological analysis that I am carrying out in this work.

Nick Moseley’s *Acting and Reacting* (2005) is another work that articulates the practical processes involved in the Meisner Technique alongside rigorous analysis of their operation. This study illuminates a number of the key aspects of the Meisner Technique that distinguishes it from other Stanislavsky-influenced methodologies. For example, on the issue of character, that Meisner dismissed from his actor’s vocabulary (Meisner and Longwell, 1987:19-20), Moseley notes that, ‘Meisner never specifically rejected the idea of the “character” as something which could exist outside of the moment,’ and that, ‘he placed the emphasis squarely on the, “reality of doing” as the main signifier of character. In other words, it is the audience, not the actor, who makes the final judgement about who the character is’ (Moseley, 2005: 126). This is particularly insightful given that later in *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, Meisner says that,

*Well, in one way you never begin on character work. In another way, you’ve already begun to do characters because character comes from*

*how you feel about something. So every time you got up and did an exercise, you were playing a character, though the word wasn't mentioned.*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 96-97)

Moseley's analysis in this instance shows that he is aware that Meisner does dismiss character as something that exists for the actor *inside* the moment, but that the perceptual work of constructing character is left to the audience and based on the actors' particular engagement in the 'reality of doing.' I will return to this issue when discussing the audience's role in constructing character and meaning within the modern, realistic paradigm of theatre and the tension that exists between this apparent freedom and the control exercised by the structural aspects of this paradigm.

However, as Moseley himself admits, the processes that he is describing are his own adaptations and combinations of Meisner with other tools and approaches taken from Stanislavsky and other practitioners from his tradition. For example, when discussing the combination of a number of Meisner's tools, Moseley also introduces an adapted version of Stanislavsky's 'objectives', called 'agendas': 'What is of real importance is, as ever, the actors' growing ability to let the three strands of the *agenda*, the *activity* and the *repetition* blend together in a unity of circumstance, with the actor's attention shifting from one to the other in an unforced way, prompted from within the space rather than within the actors' heads' (Moseley, 2005: 140). While Moseley presents a compelling acting methodology in this book that is based to a large extent on the Meisner Technique, by adapting the processes to his own needs and combining it with elements from other methodologies, he presents an acting technique that is markedly different from that depicted in *Sanford Meisner on Acting* and the related audio-visual resources that I describe above. I should restate here that my determination to concentrate first and foremost on these resources that involve Meisner's own teaching of his Technique is not some sort of modernist straining towards purity or authentic practice that may be buried in Meisner's intentions, but rather, because the particular principles that he articulates in these sources are so tightly bound up with the way

that he imparts these to his class, it is a recognition that in order to look into the processes of the Technique, it is necessary to include the manner in which he imparts these to his class. In *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, Meisner does not paint himself as a purist, acknowledging the debt he owes to Stanislavsky, Freud, and even George Bernard Shaw, and only defining himself in opposition to Strasberg. It is not the blending of methodologies that might be problematic to my work here, but the blending and adaptation of the processes that change the Technique to such an extent as to significantly alter them from the methodology that Meisner practiced in the Neighborhood Playhouse. While the lineage of Meisner's Technique is a valid and largely unexploited area of study (David Shirley's 2010 article on the adaptation of the Meisner Technique by British acting schools that I discuss immediately below is a notable exception to this), to waylay my investigation by becoming caught up in questions of the ways in which the processes have subsequently been adapted would not leave me the time or space to tackle the connections that are possible to find between the Technique and various postmodern practitioners which is one of the vital outcomes I wish to come from this project.

One piece of work that does look at the lineage of the Meisner Technique, specifically in the context of British acting schools, is David Shirley's 2010 article, "The Reality of Doing": 'Meisner Technique and British Actor training'. This work contextualises the Meisner Technique well within the Stanislavsky Tradition and draws on Pitches' classification of the Technique as Behaviourist (see below). The particular issue that he takes up is Meisner's criticism of 'British' acting as being concerned primarily with external indication as opposed to 'the reality of doing'. This is especially interesting given the rise he notes in the popularity of the Meisner Technique within British actor training institutions. The original research within this article lies primarily in the interviews he has conducted with those responsible for Meisner training within these British institutions. Despite a startling diversity in the opinions of those teaching the Meisner Technique, Shirley largely confines the Meisner Technique to an internal, emotional technique and downplays the extent to which it can be used to meet the demands of divergent styles, such as comic wordplay, Shakespeare and farce (Shirley, 2010: 211-212).

This is an opinion that does not appear to be wholly endorsed by at least two of his interviewees, Scott Williams and Thomasina Unsworth, who argue respectively that the Meisner Technique is, ‘so self-contained that the need for actors to identify objectives/superobjectives etc. becomes redundant,’ and, ‘the basic actors questions, objectives, actions etc. ... are at the heart of the Meisner Technique anyway’ (Shirley, 2010: 210-211). However, Shirley is scrupulously even-handed in his weighing of the evidence and despite his eventual conclusions foregrounds the wide scope of potential interpretations and applications of the Technique.

Jonathan Pitches’ 2006 book, *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition*, is the most rigorous critical appraisal of Stanislavsky’s world-wide legacy and takes a scientific perspective that draws from Thomas Kuhn’s model of paradigmatic dominance, rupture, and revolution. His study is more wide-ranging than simply the American narrative of Stanislavsky’s influence, but does devote considerable time and critical argument to it. Of particular relevance to this project is Pitches’ distinction between the Freudian underpinnings of Strasberg’s Method Acting, and the Behaviourist basis of Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner’s methodologies. He claims that, ‘the Meisner actor seems to be the very embodiment of the Watsonian Behaviourist project whose central concept ... was to: “Avoid mentalistic concepts such as sensation, perception and emotion, and employ only behaviour concepts such as stimulus and response”’ (Pitches, 2006: 123). Pitches takes the, ‘action and reaction pattern that is first experienced in the Repetition Exercise’ (*ibid*), as the primary evidence of this in Meisner’s Technique and makes a compelling argument from the scientific perspective that he is occupying. I will present an alternative interpretation in the Repetition chapter of this work by separating the instructions that Meisner gives from the phenomenological experience that these Behaviourist instructions generate in the students. This argument will show that the simple instructions that Meisner issues engage a deeper and more holistic engagement in the ‘reality of doing’ in his students. It is my opinion that these two perspectives are

complimentary and can therefore provide a fuller picture of the Meisner Technique through their co-existence.

Where Pitches' book is most enlightening for this study is in the wider historical context that it provides. For instance, Pitches shows how Meisner's claim that, 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 16) is a particular thread of Stanislavsky's legacy that also appears in the work of Boleslavsky, who Meisner studied under, and Robert Lewis, who Meisner acted alongside in the Group Theatre. This emphasis on action resonates with Pitches' assessment of Meisner's work as being Behaviourist and brings into sharper focus the parallel between it and the Stanislavskian schools of the 'Method of Physical Actions' and 'Active Analysis.'

Sharon Marie Carnicke's 2009 edition of *Stanislavsky in Focus* provides a potential escape from Meisner's circumscription by the Behaviourist paradigm. She suggests that rather than Stanislavsky relying upon Newtonian notions of cause and effect, that he is, 'trapped by words, unable to say what he intuits' (Carnicke, 2009: 187). In a similar way I believe that Meisner is pragmatically employing certain language and concepts in order to create a particular kind of engagement within his actors that depends upon intuition and a holistic engagement with reality, and that this engagement cannot be achieved by a logical explanation. Carnicke, by bringing Stanislavsky 'into focus' also shows new connections and resonances that the Meisner Technique might have with it, as opposed to the traditional view that looks at Meisner's methodology through the filter of Strasberg's interpretation of Stanislavsky. For instance, she asserts that, 'Stanislavsky's sense that the moment-to-moment performance of a role is the actor's present reality and truth. This paradox, which equates "truth" with "theatricality," opens the door to non-realistic aesthetics' (Carnicke, 2009: 3). This is precisely the avenue that I wish to explore in relation to Meisner in chapters Five to Eight, where I argue that Meisner's Technique, while part of the modern, realistic paradigm of theatre, is able to resonate with certain postmodern practitioners because of the processes it instigates whereby the actors

incorporate the given circumstances of the play (including elements of structure and form) within their ‘moment-to-moment performance’ of their role.

Crucially, Carnicke’s detailed attention to the parallel development of the, ‘Method of Physical Actions’, and, ‘Active Analysis’, shows one other often neglected resonance between Stanislavsky and Meisner. Maria Knebel’s interpretation of this aspect of Stanislavsky, that she called ‘Active Analysis’ in order to differentiate it from Kedrov’s more mechanistic, ‘Method of Physical Actions’, uses the physical score that a role offers, and adds to this the ‘character’s rhythmic energy and trajectory of desire’ (Carnicke, 2009: 191). This approach allows actors to, ‘draft performances by exploring the dynamics of human interaction through improvisation’ (Carnicke, 2009: 3). The resonance with Meisner’s focus on human interaction through improvisation that is anchored in the ‘reality of doing’ is therefore sharpened by Carnicke’s perspective on ‘Active Analysis’.

David Krasner’s, ‘Strasberg, Adler and Meisner: Method Acting’, from *Twentieth Century Actor Training* (2000) provides a valuable, if brief, historical survey of the main teaching strands to come out of The Group Theatre, but attempts to draw these three very diverse techniques under one umbrella. This has the dual effect of allowing the reader a greater appreciation of the cultural and ideological situation that the three trainers were operating from while minimising the impact of the distinctions that he makes between them. However, Krasner shows his sensitivity to the nuances of the diverse strands of the Method tradition in *Method Acting Reconsidered*. This volume contains a number of essays, combined with Krasner’s own work, that illuminate a number of the more precise issues arising from these acting methodologies.

For instance, Brant Pope’s, ‘Redefining Acting – The Implications of the Meisner Method’, from *Method Acting Reconsidered* (2000) is very perceptive in distinguishing between Meisner’s teaching and ‘The Meisner Technique’ as adapted and taught by his alumni and other acting programmes. It has good practical illustrations of how Meisner’s principles can be applied to

the rehearsal process, but is more a practical guide than a critical analysis. Quinn's, 'Self-Reliance and Ritual Renewal: Anti-theatrical Ideology in American Method Acting', presents a sensitive picture of the inter-subjective dynamic of Meisner-based acting, discussing the experience of the individual actors and their relationship to one another. David Saltz's, 'The Reality of Doing – Real Speech Acts in the Theatre', from *Method Acting Reconsidered*, draws heavily on speech act theory. As we shall see later in this work, a closer phenomenological examination will problematize the assertions made here.

Louise Stinespring's, 'Just Be Yourself: Derrida, Difference, and the Meisner Technique', is a deconstructive look at the Repetition exercise. This is a thorough and close examination of the central exercise of Meisner's Technique. However, I believe that its perspective, which comes from the outside and treats the actors as signs to generate meaning for an audience through their play is unhelpful at establishing the deep inter-subjective relationship that is established. It is my belief that the complexities involved can be better examined through a phenomenological approach.

Crucially, I believe that the above works do not grasp a key feature of the Meisner Technique, that despite being a part of the modern, realist paradigm of theatre, there is a radical spontaneity at the heart of the processes that it instigates that places obstacles in the way of realising authorial intention. In fact, Meisner goes so far as to warn his students that, 'The text is your greatest enemy' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 136). These processes that exert pressure on the conventions of modern, realist theatre are what I intend to tease out in the first three chapters of this work. These chapters are followed by an illustration of how Meisner adapted his Technique to serve this mode of performance in Chapter Four. In chapters Five to Eight I will show how these processes resonate with certain strands of postmodern performance, and in particular with the dynamics created by Richard Foreman, Michael Kirby, and Robert Wilson. After juxtaposing the similarities and differences that each of these instances of practice has with the Meisner Technique, while not conflating the distinct

contexts in which they worked, I will suggest the beginnings of discourses that might be established between them.

However, in order to grasp those aspects of Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson's work that are relevant to Meisner's Technique, it is important to understand some of the postmodern art that established the foundation for their work. In this way the experimental music of John Cage and George Maciunas' manifesto of 'concretism' for Fluxus performers contribute to the environment in which Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson developed their own work. Although there is no direct connection between Meisner and Cage or Maciunas, it is interesting to see that through a critical comparison we are able to identify shared concerns, processes and attitudes that they exhibit in the course of pursuing widely divergent artistic practices. For example, Meisner's determination to strip away the actor's intention by basing their performance on the reactions they have to their fellow performers resonates with John Cage's challenge to intentionality. This challenge is manifested in Cage's work through his aspiration towards an indeterminate creative process (Schmitt, 1990: 12). Cage's pursuit of indeterminacy is particular to his creative projects and has been attributed to his Zen Buddhist beliefs (Kaye, 1994: 32).

Despite the particularities of Cage's work, he partly inspired a new generation of avant-garde performers, including the Neo-Dadaists or Fluxus performers of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. A leading figure from this group was Nam June Paik who, while attributing his relocation to The United States solely to John Cage's influence (Paik in Ross, 1993: 59), took issue with the Western interpretation of Buddhism that he detected in his work, arguing plainly that, 'Zen is responsible for Asian poverty. How can I justify ZEN without justifying Asian poverty?' (Paik in Blom, 1998: 79). Instead of adopting John Cage's entire project then, Paik and certain other Fluxus performers chose to emphasise the particular material circumstances that their performances occurred within. This preoccupation was formally expressed in George Maciunas' 1965 manifesto, 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art', as

'concretism' (Maciunas, 1965: 192). Here Maciunas opposes 'concretists' to 'illusionist' artists on three specific criteria: firstly, Maciunas claims that the 'concretist' prefers unity of form and content to their separation, attempting to get closer to presentation rather than representation; secondly, the 'concretist' prefers indeterminacy and improvisation to complete the form of a work rather than human predetermination; and thirdly, the 'concretist' rejects artistic method and purpose in favour of reality and approaches art-nihilism, anti-art, and nature (Maciunas, 1965: 192-195). The resonance between Meisner and these 'concretist' Fluxus performers is striking and can be best grasped through an exploration of Meisner's key principle, that, 'The foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 16). Meisner meets Maciunas' first condition by telling his students that they must never pretend to do anything, but really perform actions on stage, the second through his insistence on spontaneous, impulsive behaviour in the moment of performance, and the third by insisting that the actor's work should ground their performance in their own reality. However, the shared concerns, processes, and attitudes that I identify do not imply that these aspects of their work were identical in every respect, but might perhaps be more accurately described as running in parallel with one another. All of these issues will be examined in greater depth throughout this work, and in particular in Chapter Five where I methodically follow the echoes of Meisner's processes through the work of these postmodern artists.

The fact that the Meisner Technique has parallel preoccupations with 'concretism' as formulated by Maciunas sets up a dynamic wherein it also resonates with a range of performance artists who followed Paik and the Fluxus performers. Performance artists such as Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson, each approached 'the event' that takes place between the spectator and the presentation in unique ways (Kaye, 1994: 70). Each of these practitioners, in their own particular way, explored certain elements that 'concretists' had addressed through their works. The commonalities between Meisner and these practitioners is therefore very interesting, especially given the fact that Meisner was actually working within the paradigm of modern, realist theatre and can only be associated with postmodern performance through a

retrospective critical comparison. In Foreman's practices of throwing every participant of his performances (writer, performer, and audience) back to the act of perception itself rather than the content of that perception, we can see Meisner's desire for the actor to react directly to what they perceive taken up and dispersed throughout the performance event. Kirby's opposition of realistic conventions to formal structure is a mirror of Meisner's coordination of the reality of doing to serve the needs of the demands of modern, realist theatre. Kirby's work plays these two imperatives off against one another in order to throw both frameworks into question and make the resolution of a singular meaning unstable, while Meisner finds strategies to make one serve the needs of the other in order to make a coherent reading by the audience possible. Wilson's layering of culturally weighty images on top of one another to point towards and simultaneously frustrate the resolution of meaning is aligned with Meisner's process of layering a fictional circumstance on top of the real acts of the actor in order to allow the audience to read such a unified meaning from it. Furthermore, Wilson's manipulation of the pace of everyday actions and his repetitious scores force a fresh consideration of the experience of the actions of his performers. Such a tactic echoes Meisner's focus on the 'reality of doing' and magnifies it so that the action is made strange and encountered afresh by both performer and audience.

However, these echoes of the Meisner Technique should in no way be seen as an assertion that the Technique is not distinct from each of these postmodern practitioners (who are indeed very different from one another). Rather, it is the frisson created by the combination of parallel processes with divergent paradigms of theatre/performance that allows for a discourse to be created between them.

Despite the synergies that can be seen to exist between the Meisner Technique and modern, realist theatre on the one hand and certain instances of postmodern performance on the other, I contend that Meisner is operating according to an alternative set of imperatives that makes it possible for his work to be relevant across both of these paradigms. By tracing

through the successive stages of Meisner's training, we are able to see how he strips away his students' preconceived ideas about acting and makes them more responsive to their direct experience of the world. Once he has established an attentive relationship between the actor and their environment he progresses to fostering a connection between the actors through the Repetition exercise that makes each performer's actions entirely dependent on their partner's behaviour. Thirdly, Meisner refines the relationship between the actor and their actions, emphasising the connection between the emotional and physical dimensions of certain tasks that combine to shape the quality of their behaviour. These three phases of the training take place prior to any discussion of which particular works the Technique will be applied to and therefore establish a 'pre-performative' training that is not tied to any singular paradigm of theatre/performance. It is only once this 'foundation of acting' has been established that Meisner moves on to applying it to realist texts through textual interpretation.

As we can see from this brief description of the progressive stages of Meisner's training, it is closely aligned with a phenomenological perspective on the world. It is of course understandable that when Meisner removes the conventions of performance and the abstract concepts that surround these from the actor's attention they are left with nothing but their direct experience of their immediate world, a field of focus that is by definition phenomenological. However, on closer investigation we can see that this is not an incidental consequence, but the central purpose of Meisner's program. This is not to say that Meisner was practicing phenomenology, or even that he was aware of phenomenological discourse, but that his acting methodology shares some key principles with the thoughts espoused by major figures from the phenomenological tradition and that in Meisner's Technique these principles are therefore phenomenologically-aligned.

The first activity that the Meisner Technique has in common with these phenomenological thinkers is to suspend any question of objective truth, of the sources or the validity of experience, from the consideration of that experience itself. This *epoché* forces both the

phenomenologist and the Meisner actor to turn their attention on to what they can grasp with their senses, and away from conjecture and argument about the causes of these phenomena or any objective truth that they may suggest. We can see that this is built into the Meisner Technique by Meisner when he states that he wants to rid his acting methodology of ‘all that “head” work’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 36). This is the move that Jonathan Pitches refers to when he claims that the Meisnerian actor becomes a model for the Watsonian Behaviourist project. However, while the actor may frame their activity in terms of stimulus and response, and I am not disputing that such an interpretation is valid, the complexity of the underlying processes this instigates suggests a more holistic perception is being engaged in that is closer to phenomenological discourse than mechanistic Behaviourism. By implicating the actor’s perspective, the Meisner Technique steps away from the objective interpretation that Behaviourism offers and towards the subjective reality that involves a holistic perception of the individual’s world. In this way it matters less what the objective picture of stimulus and response is than what the individual’s perception of the world is. The Meisner Technique makes this concrete for the actor by making it clear that it is what they themselves perceive (subjectively) rather than a character in a play, because they view this character from the outside (objectively). In this way the Meisner Technique brackets aspects of the objective world in favour of the perception that the actor has of them. In Husserl, this is the principle that the transcendental phenomenological reduction actualises (Husserl, 1980: §50). Merleau-Ponty sets this as his primary methodological approach when he advocates a ‘return to the phenomena’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 1). The anti-intellectual quality of the pursuit of the experience itself rather than what we may be able to deduce from it is perhaps less out of place in an acting methodology than it is in a school of philosophy, but in each case it is a fundamental discipline of the endeavour.

The second principle that Meisner has in common with the key phenomenologists that I will be discussing in this work is the importance of perspective for determining the phenomena that are observed. Meisner’s programme, from the observation exercises, through Repetition and

Independent Activities, stresses that what matters in the student's work is not the 'right' or 'correct' answer, but what they perceive of the world around them (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 19). Meisner repeatedly makes it clear to his students that their acting should spring from what matters to *them*, what gives *them* the impulse to act (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 157). Every observation they make of their environment, or their fellow performer in the Repetition exercise, is couched in terms of how *they* see it (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 21). This stress on the impulses and feelings of the individual actors might easily be interpreted as a reification of the 'essential self' of the actor, but might just as legitimately be seen as an awakening of perspective that shifts the focus away from the actor's self as a 'centre of meaning' and disperses it into the relationships the actor has with their environment and their fellow performers.

The second of these interpretations is particularly compelling given the synergies we have already noted between Meisner's Technique and the phenomenological tradition. The emphasis of perspectival phenomena over objective truth is a defining quality of phenomenology, and is particularly apparent in the writing of the key phenomenologists that I will be drawing from in this project. Edmund Husserl founded phenomenology as an explicit challenge to what he called the, 'natural attitude', in which objective truth is taken as a natural, unconstructed and self-evident aspect of the world (Husserl, 1970: 3). In place of this 'natural attitude' or 'naturalism' that informs some approaches to the 'natural sciences', Husserl notes that an observer experiences phenomena prior to gaining any access to 'objective truth', and that such 'objective truths' are in fact constructed from the experience of perspectival phenomena in a secondary movement of the intellect (Husserl, 1970: 29). This means that the 'truth' that can be constructed is built upon a foundation of perception and is therefore posterior to it. Fundamentally, Husserl argues that every act of perception must be made from somewhere, from a 'zero-point' of perception, as opposed to the material world being presented in an objective manner that ignores the presence of the observer and the act of perception (Husserl, 1989: §18).

Martin Heidegger reinforces Husserl's challenge to 'naturally' objective views of the world with his exploration of '*Das Man*'. This term translates literally as 'the they' and refers to the general outlook on the world that tends to challenge and level any innovative interpretations of it (Heidegger, 1962: §27). Although Heidegger's opinion of '*Das Man*' is ambiguous, given that it is the general interpretation of the world that renders it sensible to some degree, he makes it clear that for somebody to actualise themselves as an authentic *Dasein*, they must overcome the generalisations that *Das Man* forces upon them and deal instead with the rich complexity of their actual encounter with the world that they perceive (Heidegger, 1962: §51).

In a striking parallel, Meisner insists that his actors should not adhere to what others believe that they will perceive, and therefore what their impulses will be when they perform, but that they should open themselves to what they actually encounter from their specific perspective (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 19-20). As we shall see, one of the prime motivations for Meisner's forceful removal of the concept of character from his acting methodology is that it denies the actor's own perspective on the world and gives them an abstract idea of what they should be perceiving, rather than allowing them to deal directly with what they actually perceive from their particular perspective. Meisner drives this home to his class by saying, 'That's you. That's you in person. Your observation was straight, unadulterated observation. What you observed, *you* observed, not a character in a play' (*ibid*, emphasis in original).

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analyses establish a number of connections to the natural sciences, and might therefore be thought to downplay the importance of perspective. However, he does make it clear through his concepts of the unity of perception and horizontal synthesis that any theory of objective space must be grounded in the particular perspectives of perceiving subjects. Specifically, his account of the encounter between people illustrates how the construction of intersubjective being, or objectivity, is built upon a particular person's perspective on the world and their reaction to it which they then compare with the behaviour they witness another person exhibiting in the face of a shared physical environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 18).

A phenomenological approach to Meisner's Technique is therefore particularly appropriate given the similar importance the perspective of the subject is given in both situations. This is apparent in phenomenological discourse from Husserl's concept of the zero-point of orientation, through Heidegger's focus on *Dasein* (being *there*), and Levinas' insistence on the transcendence of The Other. When applied to the theatrical event, as I do in this project, it gradually emerges that neither the audience's reading of a fictional narrative from their perspective, nor the actor's 'self' from theirs, define a performance in isolation. What defines a theatrical event as such, and gives it its unique qualities, is the engaged action that allows both of these entities to be constructed. Meisner recognised this and emphasised it to his students with the motto, 'The foundation of acting is the reality of doing'. It is ultimately this principle, at the core of the Meisner Technique that allows it to transcend the paradigm of modern, realist theatre and be retrospectively put into discourse with certain forms of postmodern performance.

The third parallel between Meisner's approach to acting and phenomenology relates specifically to Husserl's incarnation of transcendental phenomenology. While Husserl advocates a 'return to the phenomena', this is not the final destination of his inquiry. Rather, from this point he advocates a number of processes that he believes can legitimately be based upon the phenomena presented to the senses. The most notable of these is the 'transcendental phenomenological reduction' with which he attempts to isolate the essential characteristics of an experience that can be extracted from a particular instance and applied to all such experiences (Husserl, 1962: 18). One example of this is Husserl's account of listening to a melody that he sets out in *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (Husserl, 1991: 5). While this analysis is based on an actual encounter with a melody, through the transcendental phenomenological reduction he attempts to remove any aspects of the experience that are directly contingent on a particular experience from his account and aims thereby to construct a universal phenomenological description of listening to melodies in

general. From this universalised theory he applies the reduction again in order to construct a phenomenological description of the human grasp of time (*ibid*).

In a similar fashion to Husserl's construction, Meisner insists that his actors deal directly with the particularities of their actual encounter with the world, but from this he attempts to distil quasi-universal principles that encourage his actors to approach this encounter in specific ways. Meisner's list of slogans include: 'The foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 16), 'Don't do anything until something happens to make you do it,' 'What you do doesn't depend on you; it depends on the other fellow' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 34), 'Silence is an absence of words, but never an absence of meaning' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 29), 'The text is your greatest enemy' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 136), 'Be specific,' and, 'An ounce of behavior is worth a pound of words' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 4). While these motto-like principles may appear as innocuous encouragement, they might actually shape the student's experience and therefore challenge the 'pure' and 'direct' way that the encounter with phenomena is presented in claims Meisner makes, such as, 'repetition ... comes purely from what you hear' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 62). This serves as a reminder that Meisner's acting methodology is not phenomenology; it is not a completely open encounter with phenomena, but an attempt to shape the actor's behaviour in certain determinate ways under the influence of an encounter with phenomena. If we do not fall into the misapprehension of assuming that Meisner's Technique might be a 'natural' way of relating to the world, we can proceed with our analysis and see how Meisner's Technique shapes the experience of the actor and thereby assess how the phenomenologically-aligned principles that underpin his acting methodology create significant resonances with postmodern performance as well as the modern, realist theatre that it was created to serve.

Meisner's Technique also shares particular concerns with the existential phenomenology that has been the dominant form of the discipline following Husserl, including those forms

practiced by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Despite the fact that Husserl resisted such a departure, it does sit comfortably with a surface reading of the phenomenology he espoused in that it is a ‘return to the phenomena’ by asserting that the experience of reality must occur before objective truth can be considered. Even Levinas’ movement back to a transcendental interpretation of phenomenology maintains an existential grounding in that it is based in particular situations of human experience, such as ‘face-to-face’ meeting (Levinas, 1969: 194). In a similar way, despite Meisner’s manipulation of his students’ experience through his insistence that they govern their behaviour according to certain principles, he always argues in the first instance from the perspective of his students. It is what the students perceive in a particular exercise or scene that determines how they should behave, and the principles that he quotes create shortcuts to avoid some common mistakes that lead to the exercise or scene breaking down (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 52-3). Throughout the training, Meisner insists that he can’t tell his students how to act, but that they must find their own particular route to it. This may be one reason that he insists that the students try his exercises and give an account of their experience before he explains the principles that he believes underlie them (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 38-40). This pedagogical pattern is repeated throughout the training, from the observation exercises, through Repetition and into Independent Activities.

Emmanuel Levinas’ separates his theories from the phenomenologists that precede him by rejecting what he sees as totalising theories of human experience that attempt to confine everything within particular frameworks and structures of meaning (Levinas, 1969: 194). He theorises that The Other confounds any attempt we may make to understand them by presenting us with absolute transcendence in our face-to-face meeting with them (Levinas, 1969: 195). Levinas makes a crucial change of direction by not saying that this transcendence *is present*, but instead arguing that *we should not* move to limit or contain this transcendence. This claim means that Levinas is moving away from ontological arguments into an ethical discussion, or from constructing theories of what exists to how people should act in the world (Levinas, 1969: 191). Crucially Levinas’ ethical standpoint is built on the respect for the

inviolable transcendence of the other. This foundation for Levinas' ethical arguments has a strong resonance with how Meisner expects his students to act (in the theatrical sense) in his classroom. However, despite these resonances, the above context of Levinas' theories should serve to remind us that they were engaged in very different activities for very distinct motivations. Meisner introduces the principle of 'the pinch and the ouch' to the Repetition exercise, a principle that instructs his students that they should not, 'do anything until something happens to make you do it,' and that, 'What you do doesn't depend on you; it depends on the other fellow' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 34). From this moment, and throughout the rest of the training, Meisner insists that his students' performances should be built on the instinctive reactions they have to their partner's behaviour, an element that is entirely outside of their control. This respect for the agency of The Other represents a strong connection between Meisner's acting method and Levinas' ethical theories and means that Levinas' analyses of 'face-to-face' meeting might offer us particularly relevant insights into the phenomenological operation of Meisner's Technique. The manner in which Levinas steps out of the ontological tradition into the ethical whilst maintaining his phenomenological methodology is similar to how Meisner's acting technique is able to work within modern, realist theatre while still remaining open to resonate with certain instances of postmodern performance, and may therefore offer valuable insights as to what the phenomenological imperatives are that establish the Meisner Technique's relevance across these different paradigms.

Later in this work I will be making certain claims about the ethics involved in the Meisner Technique and it may seem on the surface that there is a conflict between the application of Levinas' ethical theories to the dynamics of the Meisner Technique that rejects any objective, rational judgement, including of morality, from the moment of performance. However, as I will argue more fully in chapters Two and Five, while the Meisner Technique prevents the actors making objective moral judgements in the moment of performance, outside that moment they are free to do so. This constriction of the actor's focus in the moment of

performance is similar to Moseley's recognition that the Meisner actor may consider questions of character outside the moment of performance, but never from within it (Moseley, 2005: 126). More fundamentally however, Levinas' ethics are in operation within the moment of performance for the Meisner Technique, but these are a subjective ethics built on the 'face-to-face' meeting with The Other. These subjective ethics inform the dynamic that the Meisner Technique embraces and depends upon. This means that the Meisner Technique is inherently and rigorously ethical according to Levinas' theories, but that in the moment of performance these ethics do not require the actor to step back to make any objective moral judgements. In fact, according to Levinas, to do so would be unethical in that it would force them to withdraw from a 'face-to-face' encounter with The Other and lead to the actor basing their behaviour on totalising theories about the world that necessarily limit the transcendence of The Other. I will return to an in-depth discussion of this in chapters Two and Five of this work.

This is not the only case of a slightly troubled fit between the Meisner Technique and phenomenology however. Meisner's references to Freud's theories would seem to indicate that his Technique would be more aptly analysed with psychological theories. However, these references might be partly ascribable to the dominance of Freud's theories in the popular imagination of the time. Fundamentally, as I shall argue in Chapter Five, Meisner rejected what Jonathan Pitches calls the 'mechanics of Freud' (Pitches, 2006: 125), in favour of a more holistic approach of the sort that phenomenology is particularly suited to analyse.

As well as this issue, there are some instances of Meisner employing language that is reminiscent of a substance-based empirical view of the world rather than one that is aligned with phenomenology. The most problematic occasion on which this happens is on the subject of emotion when Meisner warns his students not to come in 'emotionally empty' (Meisner and Longwell, 1978: 78). As I argue in Chapter Four however, I believe that such language is employed pragmatically in order to shape the experience of his students in particular ways rather than to accurately describe the processes that are operating. However, these moments

of conflict and imperfect compatibility are far outweighed by the range of parallels that I illustrate between the Meisner Technique and the phenomenologies that I employ to analyse it.

All of the synergies between Meisner and these touchstones from the phenomenological tradition suggest that the imperatives that Meisner is operating in accordance with are independent of both modern, realist theatre and postmodern performance. Meisner's insistence on the 'return to the phenomena' throughout his training shows how this independence from particular paradigms is achieved, and also how the experience of phenomena can be used as the basis upon which those paradigms may be actualised.

The first three chapters of this work will explore the particular phenomenological imperatives that underpin the Meisner Technique. While these chapters do not claim to be a full explication of every aspect of Meisner's training, I have selected the exercises for the specific reason that they address Meisner's major preoccupations and I attempt to treat them in such a way as to show how they evolve over the course of the programme and therefore give an accurate impression of the training as a whole. The fourth chapter will build upon the foundation established by the first three and demonstrate how the phenomenological relationships of the Meisner actor are exploited in order to create modern, realist theatre. Here I will discuss the final pages of *Sanford Meisner On Acting* in which we see Meisner applying his Technique to modern, realist texts through textual analysis. I will also introduce other significant exercises, and variations of their application, thereby pointing towards a fuller impression of the Technique as a whole. The fifth chapter will then draw out the processes embedded in the Meisner Technique that disrupt modern, realist theatre and show how these relate to the postmodern field. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight look at three postmodern practitioners (Richard Foreman, Michael Kirby, and Robert Wilson) with whom Meisner's processes resonate. The frisson that is created by the combined differences and commonalities show potential sites of discourse between the various practices.

## Chapter One – Observation

Chapter One, ‘Observation’, focuses on the earliest exercises in Meisner’s training programme, that I am treating collectively as, ‘The Observation Exercises’. These include the listening exercise and the counting exercises that constitute Meisner’s attempts to establish a particular relationship between his students and their environment. The first section of the chapter deals with the observation of the immediate concrete environment and will examine this from the perspective of Husserl’s ‘zero-point’ of orientation (Husserl, 1989: §18), the requirement of double-touch, and Merleau-Ponty’s *Greifen* and horizontal syntheses (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 128). This section will show how perspective is vitally important to the Meisner actor’s relationship with their immediate concrete world and describe the phenomenal processes that the actor undergoes in order to establish their grasp on it.

Husserl’s phenomenology is often criticised for its transcendental tendencies and the fact it can be seen to ‘essentialise’ experience by attempting to define the necessary and sufficient conditions for certain types of experience that can then be transposed to other situations (Husserl, 1991: §11). However, Husserl inspired many of the phenomenologists who followed him, and his emphasis on the ‘zero-point’ of perception – where something is perceived from – is the clearest introduction to the issue of perspective within the tradition of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty on the other hand is regularly cited in recent investigations into the actor’s art by Zarrilli and others (Zarrilli, 2002a: 13). His particular strength is his attention to the physical and physiological basis of perception. A second strand that he brings with him is his reconciliation of existential phenomenology with the scientific method. This reconciliation does mean that he loses the complete grasp of the target material that less scientific brands of the discipline possess, but I hope to mitigate this by putting his work into dialogue with the other phenomenologists I refer to.

The second section of Chapter One will shift the focus from the immediate, concrete environment to the instinctual, emotional environment. Here I will discuss Meisner’s

prescription of ‘foolishness’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 47) with reference to Merleau-Ponty’s unity of perception and intentional arc (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 157). This will illustrate the anti-rational aspect of Meisner’s Technique that it shares with the phenomenological theories I make reference to. Fundamentally I will show how Meisner’s approach to acting treats the physical and emotional aspects of the actor as irrevocably connected and interdependent, another feature that it shares with the phenomenology I cite.

In section three I will describe the actors’ creation of an abstract space within the world and assess what Merleau-Ponty’s concept of *Zeigen* can tell us about this process (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 128). This section will discuss how abstract objects in the actors’ attention are treated by Meisner as being inseparable from the other ‘real’ parts of their environment, an argument that is borne out by Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the pathological case of Schneider (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 153).

Taken together, the three sections of this chapter establish the features that define the Meisner actor’s relationship with their environment. This analysis will demonstrate that the relationship between the actor and their environment is not dictated by the paradigms of modern, realist theatre or postmodern performance and is therefore the first step of proving my thesis that the Meisner Technique is able to transcend the paradigm of theatre it was created to serve and can retrospectively be seen to resonate with, and enter into discourse with, certain modes of postmodern performance.

## Chapter Two – Repetition

This chapter contains the second of my three phenomenological analyses of specific aspects of Meisner’s training. Here the process under investigation is Meisner’s most famous exercise, Repetition, and I will draw out of this how Meisner expects performers to relate to one another. I will describe the phenomenological dimension of the successive stages of the Repetition exercise from the contrasting perspectives of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas in order to

see the ways the exercise might be shaping the perception of the actor and thereby allowing them to craft their behaviour to meet the demands of different paradigms of theatre/performance. I introduce Levinas at this point because of the particular attention he pays to the encounter with other people. Emmanuel Levinas brings an entirely different perspective to the discussion by taking it from the realms of ontology to ethics (Levinas, 1969: 201). In doing this he rejects the totalising theories of the phenomenologists who precede him and instead sets down the ethical conditions of ‘face-to-face’ meeting (Levinas, 1969: 194). My discussion here will distinguish Levinas’ subjective ethics that are built upon the inviolable transcendence of The Other from objective forms of ethics that rely on totalising theoretical frameworks and therefore illustrate how the Meisner Technique is able to operate ethically without demanding that the actor make objective, moral judgements in the moment of performance.

This chapter will show how the interaction between actors in Meisner’s classroom enables them to craft a performance, as opposed to simply trying to *be* something specific for an audience. This furthers my argument that Meisner’s acting technique can retrospectively be seen to resonate with certain examples of postmodern performance at the same time that it serves modern, realist theatre by showing how the relationships between actors in this acting methodology are relevant to both. Its relevance to the divergent modes of performance stems from the phenomenological alignment of its imperatives that we will discover through this analysis.

## Chapter Three – Independent Activities

In this, the third of my phenomenological analyses, I will assess what the Meisner Technique’s Independent Activity exercise can tell us about the relationship between actors and their actions. The actions of actors are the most externally visible facet of their experience and therefore may provide the clearest illustration of my thesis. I will employ concepts from Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger in order to analyse the relationship between the acting student

and their activity. Merleau-Ponty is useful in this instance because of his discussion of the role of the body in perception and action that allows us to see a direct connection between the human being and the world through action (Levine in Zarrilli, 2002a: 13). Heidegger's *Being and Time*, however, is the fundamental theoretical framework of this chapter. This work is the most comprehensive attempt to phenomenologically describe the way that people are in the world, a state that he calls *Dasein* (literally 'being-there') (Heidegger, 1962: 81). In this chapter I will mainly rely upon Heidegger's understanding of the chain of human significances that objects in the world constitute. It is these significant, personal objects that people engage in activities with and for, rather than the objective materials they might be described as by objective, natural science (Heidegger, 1962: §86). It is the emphasis on personal significance and the importance of perspective that gives meaning to the students' Independent Activities and that ultimately allows us to understand the exercise primarily as engaged action in the world that can serve modern, realist theatre and yet still have resonance with certain instances of postmodern performance.

I will be applying these phenomenological tools to assess the effect of the four conditions that I argue Meisner's Independent Activity exercise consists of, two that he states explicitly and two that can be deduced from his feedback to his students. These are that the activity the students engage in should be something they have the skill or ability to perform, but that is difficult, and something they have a reason to do, and that this requires the activity to be done urgently. As this list demonstrates, the conditions fall neatly into two pairs that exist in a state of tension. What will become apparent in Chapter Three where I deal with this in greater depth is that all four exist in a state of tension and interaction with one another, and that although we can discuss each feature in isolation, it is the interplay of these four aspects of the activity, laid on top of the processes described by an application of the phenomenological theories of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, that shape the experience of the actor and therefore their actions. One of the outcomes of this discussion is the discovery of a 'hidden compartment' within the actor's awareness that is sealed off from their overt attention while

performing the activity. This means that the concerns and personal significances of the actor that fall outside the needs of the particular performance they are giving can be put to one side in order to minimise the impact they have on their behaviour. A second major outcome of this discussion is the discovery that the Independent Activity works directly in conjunction with Repetition in order to increase the spontaneity of the actor in relation to their partner. Both Repetition and Independent Activities are in turn built upon the relationship between the actor and their environment that is established by the opening observation exercises, showing how the three aspects of Meisner's early training interact in order to shape the way the Meisner actor perceives and therefore interacts with the world when they are performing.

## **Chapter Four – Meisner and Phenomenological Realism**

Having completed the phenomenological analyses of the three Meisner exercises and explored the actors' relationship to space, others, and action in the first three chapters, this chapter will discuss how these relationships are utilized in order to actualise modern, realistic theatre. Here I will show how an acting methodology that is not necessarily tied to this paradigm of theatre can nevertheless be used to perform it. This discussion will show how the specific relationships cultivated by Meisner's Technique shift the burden of representation from the actor on to the audience, thereby allowing fictional narratives to be read from the actors' performances, without confining these performances to an exclusively representational function.

I will firstly focus on those demands that modern, realist theatre makes on the actor that force Meisner to adjust the Technique that he has built up in the early stages of his training. The first of these is the unity of character that this paradigm of theatre asserts that may depend upon fictional circumstances that are not actually performed. The tool that Meisner applies to this demand is Emotional Preparation which I shall distinguish from Strasberg's Emotion Memory. The second requirement of modern, realist theatre that Meisner must take into account is that the actor must recite a prewritten script, and I shall show how Meisner's

instruction for his actors to learn the lines by rote allows them to do this without interrupting the instinctual foundation that they have built up in the early stages of the training. I will couch this phase of the discussion in terms of Merleau-Ponty's description of habitual action because of the directness with which this addresses the alteration that habit makes to actions (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 100-1). The third demand of modern, realist theatre that Meisner must take into account is that the actor should represent a fictional character to the audience, and he confronts this issue with Stanislavsky's tool of Particularisation. I will apply Merleau-Ponty's theory of a unity of the senses under the 'intentional arc' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 156-7) to show how the actor is able to exchange elements of their world for others so that their behaviour may be read as that of a fictional character. I will then discuss the Spoon River exercise that is Meisner's alternative method of realising the demands of modern, realist theatre through the 'bringing together' of the actor's perspective with that of a fictional character. Finally, I will discuss the last pages of *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, where he discusses the application of his Technique to realist texts through textual analysis.

This analysis will point towards the conclusion that the Meisner Technique is moving away from the psychological realism that Stanislavsky and Strasberg practiced (and the objective rational worldview this relies upon) to a phenomenological realism that hinges upon a series of subjective, phenomenologically-aligned imperatives. This is the broader paradigmatic background to all of the stages of my argument and while such a meta-argument is not either provable or disprovable in absolute terms, it is this larger picture that is beginning to emerge from the collective weight of the smaller conclusions that can be reached.

My discussion here connects to several discourses about theatre/performance from the second half of the Twentieth Century to the present day. These connections force a reconsideration of some of the assumptions that have been taken for granted in these conversations and thereby expand our understanding of the possible approaches to modern, realist theatre. This shows the amount of work still to be done towards the phenomenology of

theatre started by Garner, Wilshire, and States and that this phenomenological project has the potential to challenge conventional understandings of acting. Most importantly for this thesis, this discussion will demonstrate that the Meisner Technique demands a more nuanced understanding than its common categorisation as Method Acting allows.

## Chapter Five – The Postmodern Field

The most significant task of this piece of writing is to free the Meisner Technique from an exclusive relevance to the modern, realist paradigm of theatre that it has been confined within by its casual categorisation as Method Acting. Although Meisner is undoubtedly part of the narrative of Stanislavsky's influence on American acting, there are a number of phases involved in this transfusion, at each of which Stanislavsky's work was variously (mis)translated and adapted. By separating Stanislavsky's System, Strasberg's Method Acting, and Meisner's Technique, we are able to identify the underlying worldviews that each was constructed to be compatible with. In doing so, we will show a way for the Meisner Technique to escape being completely circumscribed by the paradigm of modern, realist theatre.

Once this possibility has been opened, I will discuss the processes that the Meisner Technique incites within the actors' relationships with the world, other people, and actions that challenge the foundation of 'truth' and authority that modern, realist theatre is built upon. These processes enable Meisner's Technique to explore some of the key preoccupations of postmodern performance. Although I acknowledge the diversity of this field of performance and the fact that its most apparent defining characteristic is its flight from definition (Kaye, 1994: 144), I do note that, following the work of John Cage, a recurring preoccupation of this group of performances is indeterminacy. I will discuss the way this concern is embedded within the phenomenal structure that Meisner's training establishes with particular reference to my analyses of Observation, Repetition, and Independent Activities. I do acknowledge the different meanings that such concepts take on within different paradigms of performance and between the working processes of different practitioners within each paradigm. However,

while the concept may not be identical across these contexts, its recurrence does suggest preoccupations and processes that at least run parallel to one another. It is the combination of these parallels with the divergent contexts that creates the frisson necessary for discourse to be established between them.

Moving beyond Cage's pursuit of indeterminacy that is attributable to specifically Zen Buddhist motivations, I will show how Meisner's 'Reality of Doing' connects him very strongly to the 'concretists' of the Fluxus movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s as defined by George Maciunas' 1965 manifesto of Neo-Dadaism. In particular, the work of Nam June Paik, a leading figure of Neo-Dadaism, or Fluxus, echoes Meisner's concerns with the material circumstances of particular performances. This concern with the reality of performing actions as opposed to representational pretence is a significant parallel between the work of the two practitioners. Again, these connections do not imply that the works are identical and the divergent aims and contexts can serve to invigorate rather than limit the discourse between them.

## **Chapter Six – Richard Foreman**

It is the point at which these concerns re-enter the tradition of performance where the echoes of Meisner are the sharpest and most distinct. Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson treat the possibility of 'deep meaning' with suspicion and give priority to surface elements of 'the event' that takes place between the spectator and the presentation (Kaye, 1994: 70). Each of these three performance practitioners present very distinct aesthetics, but each incorporate dynamics within their work that resonate strongly with the processes that Meisner instigated in his actors.

In this chapter I introduce Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. The first significant difference between the Meisner Technique and Richard Foreman's work with the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre is that the former is used to train actors while the latter is as a writer, director, and overall artistic director. The common threads that I am drawing from both are

the processes involved in interacting with actors/performers and the phenomenal effects that these have on the experience of the actor/performer.

The first commonality that I trace here is the use by both the Meisner Technique and Foreman's directing style of the whole personality of the actor/performer. The second similarity between the two practices is the dismissal of the concept of character. The third parallel I trace is the physical focus of the Meisner Technique through the 'reality of doing' and Foreman's directions to performers to deliberately raise or lower the tension in the performer's body. My discussion of Kate Manheim's performance of one scene from *Rhoda in Potatoland* brings out both the similarities and differences between the processes instigated by the Meisner Technique and Foreman's directing. In order to further avoid the risk of conflating Foreman's practices in the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre with the Meisner Technique I outline Foreman's overall artistic purpose with his Ontological-Hysteric productions to allow people to be, 'seized by the elusive, unexpected aliveness of the moment' (Foreman, 1976: 76). However, while this leads to Foreman setting himself in direct opposition to the paradigm of theatre that the Meisner Technique originated from, by its prioritisation of direct perceptual experience, this oppositional relationship can be seen instead as the basis for discourse because of the shared connection that both practices have with phenomenology.

Foreman's practices of emphasising the act of perception itself rather than the content of that perception to each participant of his performances (writer, performer, and audience) relate to Meisner's desire for the actor to react directly to what they perceive and disperse this concern throughout the performance event. From the combined parallels and disjunctions that I outline here I then initiate an open-ended discourse between the Meisner Technique and Richard Foreman's practices with the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre.

## Chapter Seven – Michael Kirby

In this chapter I show the basis for discourse between the Meisner Technique and the performance works of Michael Kirby. As founder of the Structuralist Workshop Kirby brought concepts and practices directly from minimal art into theatre practice. As such Kirby directly invoked some of the preoccupations of Cage and Fluxus that I discuss in Chapter Five. This context immediately implies a very different artistic identity than the Meisner Technique that was devised to meet the requirements of modern, realist theatre.

Despite the divergent paradigms in which they operated, Kirby embraces realism, and in particular realistic acting in his works. Kirby's pursuit of 'film acting' is one facet of his work that might connect to the Meisner Technique as the latter is often said to be particularly suited to this mode of performance (Shirley, 2010: 204).

Taking the example of *First Signs of Decadence*, I show how Kirby's opposition of realistic conventions to formal structure strongly echoes Meisner's coordination of the reality of doing to serve the needs of modern, realist theatre. Kirby's work lays these two imperatives incongruously on top of one another in order to throw both frameworks into question and make the resolution of a singular meaning unstable, while Meisner instigates processes that make one serve the needs of the other in order to make a coherent reading by the audience possible.

When I examine *Double Gothic* however, other potential sites of discourse between the Meisner Technique and the performance practices of Michael Kirby can be identified. For example, outside of *First Signs of Decadence*, Kirby claims that the actor need not be aware of the structure of the performance in the moment of performance. This resonates strongly with the Meisner Technique's dismissal of character from the actor's perception in the moment of performance – in both cases structural aspects of the performance are put beyond the actor's perception when performing. This further resonates with my argument that the Meisner Technique operates according to a subjective ethical dynamic based on the 'face-to-face'

encounter with The Other that does not need to be founded on objective, moral judgements. The commonalities between the processes of the Meisner Technique and Michael Kirby's performance work, combined with the substantive distinctions between them, suggests the potential for discourse between them that I initiate here.

## **Chapter Eight – Robert Wilson**

In this chapter I discuss the basis for discourse between the Meisner Technique and Robert Wilson's directorial work, specifically in regards to the processes each instigate in their actors/performers and the phenomenal effects these have on their experience. I make clear the differences in context, purpose and aesthetic between Wilson and Meisner as well as between Wilson and the other postmodern practitioners that I discuss. Most notable among the distinctions between Wilson and the Meisner Technique are the effects on Wilson's work of his speech impediment and Mrs Byrd Hoffman's exercises to correct this, his subsequent workshops with disabled performers, and the observation made by Stefan Brecht that realistic acting can be detrimental to the overall aesthetic of Wilson's productions. However, as with Richard Foreman and Michael Kirby, despite these distinctions there are a host of shared preoccupations and processes. For example, Wilson's layering of culturally weighty images on top of one another to point towards, while simultaneously frustrating, the resolution of meaning is reminiscent of Meisner's process of layering a fictional circumstance on top of the real acts of the actor in order to allow the audience to read such a unified meaning from them. Furthermore, Wilson's manipulation of the pace of everyday actions and his repetitious scores force a fresh consideration of the experience of these actions. Such a tactic echoes Meisner's focus on 'the reality of doing', and magnifies it so that the action is made strange and encountered afresh by both the performer and the audience.

A further preoccupation that the Meisner Technique shares with Robert Wilson's practices is the priority given to the full expression of the performer's individuality. This was also a feature of Foreman's work, although just as with Meisner, this aspiration comes from a unique context

and is the result of very different forces and intentions. In the case of the Meisner Technique it relates to the use of the actors' whole unity of perception in order to generate impulsive behaviour, in Foreman it arises from his recognition of a particular person's way of being that will help him to express his own meaning as clearly as possible, and it is this part of his project that 'transmutes' his performers', 'painful impotence', into, 'the grace dignity of an individuality as it is' (Brecht, 1994: 201). However, despite these diverse routes towards, and motivations for, this particular goal, the fact that each of these practitioners worked towards the fullest expression of the performers' individuality provides the foundation for discourse between them to be established. In this chapter it is the collection of these similarities and differences that allow me to initiate the opening of a discourse between the Meisner Technique and the work of Robert Wilson.

All of the issues that I raise here are where the Meisner Technique resonates most strongly with the paradigm of postmodern performance and how discourse between the divergent practices is possible. These echoes allow us to look at postmodern performance from a fresh perspective and see a previously ignored instance of continuity between it and the paradigm of modern, realist theatre. I argue that the presence of these elements within Meisner's Technique, being simultaneously alongside features that support modern, realist theatre, demonstrate that the Meisner Technique is relevant to both of these divergent paradigms. Furthermore this simultaneity is built upon a set of phenomenologically-aligned imperatives that establish its potential independence from either paradigm.

# Observation

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As the first part of the phenomenological examination of Meisner's Technique, this exploration of the act of observation in Meisner's classroom seeks to establish the defining characteristics of the actor's relationship with their environment. The particular aspects of the environment that I will isolate are: the immediate concrete environment, the instinctual emotional environment, and the creation of an abstract space within this environment. It is necessary to investigate the relationship that is established between the actor and their environment by the Meisner Technique as this is the foundation of the dynamic that can serve modern, realist theatre and also resonate with certain examples of postmodern performance. This will begin to demonstrate the thesis of this work that the Meisner Technique is able to enter into a productive discourse with certain examples of postmodern performance and therefore creates continuities between two divergent paradigms of theatre/performance.

The first section of this chapter will deal with the observation of the immediate concrete environment. Here I will examine the paradigm of Meisner's listening exercise from the perspective of Husserl's 'zero-point' of orientation, the requirement of double-touch, Merleau-Ponty's *Greifen* and horizontal syntheses. The second section will shift the focus from the immediate, concrete environment, to the instinctual, emotional environment. Here I will discuss Meisner's prescription of 'foolishness' with reference to Merleau-Ponty's unity of perception and intentional arc. In section three I will describe the creation of an abstract space within the world as exemplified by the Independent Activity exercise, and assess what Merleau-Ponty's concept of *Zeigen* can tell us about this process.

It is worth restating here that while my subject is the Meisner Technique, this technique consists of more than the abstract principles that can be distilled from it. The phenomenological approach illustrates that the whole perception of the subject is interrelated and that in this instance the ways that Meisner conveys the principles of the Technique to his

students are as much a part of the Technique as the principles themselves. It is for this reason that Meisner abandoned his previous attempts to articulate his Technique; as he claims, these earlier attempts didn't illustrate how, 'human personalities interlock in the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: xviii).

As a whole, this chapter will set forth the particular characteristics that define the Meisner actor's relationship with their environment. This is the first step in an over-arching argument asserting that the dynamic fostered by the Meisner Technique to allow actors to perform modern, realist theatre has a number of significant resonances with particular instances of postmodern performance and is therefore an instance of continuity between two paradigms of theatre/performance.

## Section One – The Immediate, Concrete Environment

In the first class of the Neighbourhood Playhouse's term Meisner introduces his listening exercise. He tells his students:

*"Now, listen to me for a minute. Just for yourselves, listen to the number of cars that you hear outside. Do that."*

*The students, eight men and eight women in their twenties and early thirties, lean forward, straining to hear the sounds of New York City traffic filtering through the whir of the air-conditioner. After a moment some close their eyes. A minute passes.*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 17)

This exercise contains a very basic task in which the students observe their concrete environment through their auditory sense mechanism or, more simply put, they count the number of cars they hear. It is followed by a number of other exercises in which they are told to perform similar activities, but I will first concentrate on the listening exercise and then extrapolate my findings to see how these other exercises fit the picture I have created. I contend that one of the strengths of the Meisner Technique is that it cloaks within its apparent simplicity fundamental principles that accumulate through the course of the training to orient the students to an effective relationship with their work within a modern, realist paradigm of

theatre and that it is these principles that connect with some of the processes of particular postmodern practitioners. Furthermore, it is a pragmatic method and therefore not organised by the philosophical issues it touches on, but derives its effectiveness from the exploitation of a number of interrelated and overlapping issues simultaneously. Part of my work through this project is to trace this network of meaning in order to chart the workings of Meisner's method. The case of observation is the first instance of this process.

Firstly we must turn our attention to the way this exercise implicates the students' perspectives through their observation of the world around them. Every act of perception contains two necessary elements – the perceived object and the perceiving subject. Husserl attacks the 'natural attitude' to the world for emphasising the object while lapsing into a wilful forgetfulness regarding how the subject accesses it (Husserl, 1970: 3-4). The first feature of observing the immediate concrete environment is that it is done from *somewhere*, from a certain perspective.

Although Husserl is criticised for his tendency to argue abstractly through the practice of his transcendental phenomenological reduction, in his posthumously published work *Ideas*, he hints at a form of phenomenology that places more importance on the role of the body in perception. He says, 'The Body [*Leib*] is, in the first place, the *medium of all perception*; it is the *organ of perception* and is *necessarily* involved in all perception' (Husserl, 1989: §18, emphasis in original). Furthermore, Husserl claims that because the body is necessary for all perception, it is the 'zero-point' of all perception (*ibid*). This shows that Husserl's answer to the question of where acts of observation are located is the Body (*Leib*).

If we pay close attention to Meisner's instructions for the listening exercise, he says, 'Just for yourselves, listen to the number of cars that you hear outside' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 17). By telling the students to listen, 'just for [them]selves', he is emphasising their role as actively perceiving subjects in the exercise. This premise is borne out by Meisner's interrogation of the students' experiences. Meisner asks a selection of the students how many

cars they heard, but apparently only as a means to ask the follow up question: 'Did you listen as yourself or were you playing some character?' (ibid).

The first lesson of Meisner's class is that as perceiving subjects, the students are operating from a 'zero-point' of orientation – themselves, and not the intellectually constructed perspective of a character. Although he does not define this 'self' as the body, by asking them to engage in a perceptual act, and by stressing that 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 16), he is orienting this self as the centre from which such acts radiate. If we take on board what we have gleaned from Husserl, we can see that by getting his students to perform the listening exercise, Meisner is forcing them to associate their acts of perception with their body.

Merleau-Ponty has a different way to describe the necessity of the body for perception. Because the body is 'always there' in perception its, 'permanence is absolute and is the ground for the relative permanence of disappearing objects, real objects' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 105-6). From this angle we can see that through the listening exercise, and in his particular command to listen 'just for yourselves', Meisner is emphasising the ground of his students' perception through their attention to the disappearing objects which are the targets of the exercise. This is not a process that focuses the student's attention on their body as the ground of their perception, for to do so would be to make the body the 'figure' or 'object' of consciousness and thus construct it as a separate entity from themselves, cut off from their 'self' as much as the other 'disappearing' objects around them are. Instead of confirming the absolute permanence of their body in perception, this would align the body with other disappearing objects and thus have the opposite effect.

As an example of why I am focusing so tightly on the teaching of Sanford Meisner rather than those acting teachers who have subsequently adapted his approach, Scott Williams' teaching of the listening exercise is subtly, but crucially different. In his workshop conducted at the University of Exeter in 2001, Scott Williams tells his students to relax in their chairs and to, 'just

listen' (Williams, 2001: 11:00). From his explanation of the exercise following the practical application of it, Williams makes it clear that he, like Meisner, is attempting to initiate the actor's reality of doing. However, because Williams does not give his students a target for their action (as Meisner does with the cars passing outside), taken together with the fact that Williams puts the actors' attention on to their own activity by making them focus on what they are doing rather than simply doing it, he is doing precisely what I argue Meisner is avoiding and aligning the body as the instrument of perception with the 'disappearing' objects around them. Such a subtle and significant difference is one example of how the specific ways that Meisner imparts the principles of his Technique are inherent parts of the Technique itself. It is for this reason that I focus primarily on Meisner's own teaching of the Meisner Technique rather than the variations made by those who have adapted and evolved his methodology.

This issue clarifies a possible function of the tasks that Meisner sets his students immediately following the listening exercise. First of all, Meisner asks the students to sing a song, not out loud, but again, 'just to yourself' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 18). Meisner is subtly reinforcing that the body is the ground of the students' perception by insisting that his students do it 'just to yourself', and then asking them, 'How many people were doing it ... For yourselves or theatrically?' (ibid). Given the similarity to the procedure surrounding the listening exercise, where the students are told to perform a simple task 'for yourself' and then asked whether they did it as themselves or as a character, it is a fair assumption to make that when Meisner talks of singing 'theatrically' he means singing as a character.<sup>1</sup> This assumption is confirmed when he asks a student to clarify that he was trying to enjoy the melody, 'For yourself, not as Hamlet?' (ibid). For the next task, 'Meisner asks the class to count the number of light bulbs in the room. ... The answers are unimportant; what *is* crucial is the doing of the task, the *counting* of the light bulbs, not the results. "Did you count in character – theatrically," Meisner asks, "or did you count?"' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 18-19, emphasis in original). So while the ostensible target of Meisner's first lessons is 'the reality of doing' and

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<sup>1</sup> The slight difference between counting 'for yourself' and singing 'to yourself' relates to the extension of the activity beyond pure observation to action and observation, but this doesn't make observation any less crucial to the exercise.

while this may be perfectly true at one level, underneath this there is a process of orientation taking place where the students are being anchored in their perspective on the world, their zero-point of perception, their body. My theory here is supported by what Meisner says later in the training, in relation to the ‘Spoon River’ exercise: “You know, my biggest job in teaching you as actors is to bring you together with yourself. That’s the root of creative acting.” (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 160). This is Meisner talking explicitly about the process of anchoring his students in their bodies as their perspective on the world, and claiming that this orientation is necessary for ‘creative acting’.

This is not the end of the story, however, for if this bodily orientation is to be complete according to the work of late Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, tactile sensation must be present. Husserl says, ‘the Body ... becomes a *Body* only by incorporating tactile sensations, pain sensations, etc. – in short, by the localization of these sensations as sensations’ (Husserl, 1989: §37). Hence, according to Husserl, the listening, silent singing, and counting that Meisner makes his students do would not be enough to orient them in their bodies as they all minimize the role of touch. Husserl claims that the reason this tactile dimension is necessary is the ‘double constitution’ of the body as something that can both touch and be touched. This ‘double touch’ is not a feature of sight, hearing, or any of our other sensory mechanisms. Meisner comes close to incorporating tactile sensations into his training when demonstrating ‘the pinch and the ouch.’ The two principles at play within ‘the pinch and the ouch’ are, ‘don’t do anything until something happens to make you do it, and ... what you do doesn’t depend on you but on the other fellow...’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 34). Meisner demonstrates this by literally pinching a student when their back is turned, making them react with violent surprise. However, Meisner only does this to physically demonstrate a metaphorical principle operating at an instinctive level during the Repetition exercise that I shall analyse this more closely in Chapter Two. Tactile sensations are more directly incorporated into the training in the Independent Activities which I shall examine in more depth in Chapter Three with reference to what Heidegger calls the ‘instrumental complex’ that constitutes our world.

With the issue of the tactile localisation of sensation put to one side for the time being, we might temporarily treat the picture of the perceiving subject complete in relation to their concrete environment and allow ourselves to move on to the second part of the formula for perception, the perceived object. While it is my contention that one of the primary purposes of these early exercises is to orient the students in their bodies, this does not mean that the body is cut off from the world. Such a picture would force our approach to revert to a Cartesian interpretation where the actor, inside their self, looks out on a world beyond themselves in order to understand it. Rather, I contend that each act of perception simultaneously defines the perceiving subject and the perceived object in relation to one another. This is especially the case in the listening exercise that asks the students to reach out from their particular perspective on the world to the sounds that objects outside the classroom make. This implies a significant degree of interdependence between the self and the world or, even more radically, that the self is inseparable from the world. This is what phenomenological inquiry takes as its starting point – Being-in-the-world.

The first issue to be raised about a phenomenological examination of objects in the world is that it brackets the issue of the objective truth of these objects, and focuses instead on the phenomena – how these objects present themselves to the consciousness of the subject. Husserl makes the case that objects in the world can only ever be grasped in an adumbrative fashion (through an infinite number of perspectival presentations, in each of which it is given only partially), but phenomena appear to a subject as whole and complete regardless of their relation to any objective truth. Husserl claims that phenomenology is potentially a more powerful method than the natural sciences because of this greater grasp of its target material (Husserl, 1970: 29-30). As this is a phenomenological investigation, I will be examining the phenomena of objects (how they are manifested in the perception of human beings) rather than their objective truth.

As I now move from a Husserlian perspective to one derived from Merleau-Ponty's work, we should note the different directions of their investigations. While I have so far stressed the continuity between late Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, their differences should not be overlooked. As Stanton Garner warns, 'Generalizations are risky with a field that has included figures as various as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gaston Bachelard, and Paul Ricoeur; it might be more accurate to speak of "phenomenologies" in reference to these and others in the philosophical tradition...' (Garner, 1994: 2). The diversity of phenomenological approaches practiced by different thinkers makes it more appropriate to talk of 'phenomenologies' as this avoids creating the impression of a coherent and unified school of thought. This, then, is the first time that we have switched from one phenomenological approach to another, and while the entire framework of these thinkers may not be in absolute agreement, each one can provide a particular and possible interpretation of phenomena that will help us to construct the analysis we intend to create. The first divergence between phenomenological traditions is on the issue of whether it should be a transcendental or an existential activity. For the bulk of his career, Husserl saw his phenomenology as a transcendental form of enquiry, closer to the realm of cerebral meditation than the examination of bodily experience. After Husserl, however, the majority of the most significant figures of phenomenology (including Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty) have practiced their phenomenology from an existential standpoint (Cerbone, 2006: 37). Heidegger, a one-time student of Husserl, made this break and concentrated on the actions of people in the world. So while Husserl gains access to the subject's experience through meditative reflection, Merleau-Ponty (and the other existentialist phenomenologists) gain their access through actions in the world, and what these can tell us about the subject's experience.

Merleau-Ponty's view of the human in the world challenges the classical distinction of form and matter as we cannot, 'conceive the perceiving subject as a consciousness which "interprets," or "orders" a sensible matter according to an ideal law which it possesses. Matter is "pregnant" with its form...' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 12). By saying that, 'matter is

'pregnant with its form', Merleau-Ponty is proposing that there is not an objective truth that people can access through the matter of the world. Instead there is potential meaning within the matter of the world, but it is not 'born' until the human being perceives it. Such a position makes the perspective of the subject, that we have just discussed, vitally important. To return to Meisner's listening exercise, we see that there is not a 'truth' about the number of cars passing outside (or if there is, it is not the object of the exercise). Instead the mixture of sounds present in the classroom is pregnant with potential meaning that is not actualised until the individual students perceive it. Rather than there being a 'form' or objective truth about the number of cars passing by outside, the primary focus is the perception of the students, the number of cars that *they hear*. It should not be overlooked that despite Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on perception, there is an implicit assumption that there is some objective truth, however unattainable, behind these perceptions.

This brings us to an intriguing connection between Merleau-Ponty and Meisner. Merleau-Ponty says, 'We experience a perception and its horizon "in action" [*pratiquement*] rather than by "posing" them or explicitly knowing them' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 12). Thus in Merleau-Ponty, action is the basis of perception, just as in Meisner, action (or the 'reality of doing') is the basis of acting. This strong parallel justifies our investigation into Meisner's acting method through phenomenology – the study of perception – as both claim the common foundation of action. For Merleau-Ponty, all rationality is based on the act of perception, and this perception is only possible through action, implying that action is necessary for reason to exist. This apparent contamination of thought by the physical world is a feature of Merleau-Ponty's 'incarnated *cogito*'. He says quite simply, 'The perceiving mind is an incarnated mind' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 3). By this he means that the mind and the body of the subject are not distinct elements, but fundamentally inseparable qualities of the subject. For example, the cases of phantom limbs he cites, 'force us to form the idea of an organic thought through which the relation of the 'psychic' to the 'physiological' becomes conceivable' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 89).

Merleau-Ponty reasons from the fact ‘we grasp external space through our bodily situation ... [that] a system of possible movements, or “motor projects,” radiates from us to our environment’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 5). It is not just movement that operates in this fashion, but also sensory engagement as we saw in Meisner’s listening exercise. Counting the sounds of passing cars is just one of the nearly infinite number of possible motor projects that determine the students’ situation in the world. Merleau-Ponty continues on to say that, ‘Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space’ (*ibid*). This ‘haunting’ is an expression of the network of possible motor projects that extend from the subject; they do not need to actively engage in a particular motor project in order to endow themselves and the object of the action with meaning – the potential action is enough. This means that the human subject does not exist within the world like other things, but that it exists through its potential to act within the world, not just the material fact and consequences of such action. This potential to act in certain ways defines the subject’s place in the world; it creates their relative position in it and simultaneously creates meaning out of it for them. By implicating the actor’s body and perception of the world from the very outset of his training programme, Meisner therefore emphasises this way of being-in-the-world – haunting the world via an infinite number of potential motor projects that radiate from them into their environment.

Merleau-Ponty clarifies the way the world exists for the perceiving subject by saying that, ‘it is necessary that meaning and signs, the form and matter of perception, be related from the beginning and that, as we say, the matter of perception be “pregnant with its forms”’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 15). He does insist, however, that, ‘the meaning which I ultimately discover is not of the conceptual order’ (*ibid*). This is our first hint that the ‘reality’ Merleau-Ponty is getting at is distinct from ‘truth’. The reason for this becomes apparent when he explains how the perceiving subject synthesises the ‘real’ from the sensory data it is given:

*Let us say with Husserl that it is a “synthesis of transition”—I anticipate the unseen side of the lamp because I can touch it—or a “horizontal synthesis”—the unseen side is given to me as “visible from another standpoint.” At once given but only immanently.*

(Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 16)

In the listening exercise, we see the students making horizontal syntheses in order to count the number of cars they hear. They may be confused by the sensory information they are receiving – uncertain which are cars, confused by other sound events that they hear at the same time – but they take the sounds to mean that they would be able to count the number of cars ‘from another standpoint’ that was not so polluted with other sounds and where the sounds of the cars were clearer and less ambiguous.

The ultimate distinction between the ‘real’ and the ‘true’ is explained by Merleau-Ponty when he says:

*What prohibits me from treating my perception as an intellectual act is that an intellectual act would grasp the object either as possible or as necessary. But in perception it is “real”; it is given as the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views in each of which the object is given but in none of which it is given exhaustively.*

(ibid)

Thus Merleau-Ponty arrives at the ‘real’ through an, ‘infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views’. In the accounts of the listening exercise given by some of Meisner’s students, we see evidence of these projected perspectival views from which they imagine the cars’ sounds clarified from the particular confusing elements present in their individual perceptions. For example, Anne says, ‘I was confused because I couldn’t hear a car, and the sounds were confusing. Then I heard what I’m pretty sure was a car ... and then I heard another car. So I heard two cars’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987:17).

Merleau-Ponty concludes his argument by saying, ‘It is not accidental for the object to be given to me in a “deformed” way, from the point of view [place] which I occupy. That is the price of its being “real”’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 15-16). This passage clearly reveals the tension in Merleau-Ponty between a purely phenomenological approach and one that relies on objective

truth, for if something is to be received in a ‘deformed’ way, this implies the existence in principle of a ‘form’, an ideal, objective truth that perception does not have access to.

Merleau-Ponty’s vision of reality is therefore a ‘deformed’ image resulting from a particular point of view. This would appear to be a formulation of reality that Meisner might accept, as he stresses that he is not interested in any objective truth, but in the activity of the student in perceiving the world around them. Therefore, when Meisner asks his students to count the light bulbs in his classroom, ‘the answers are unimportant; what *is* crucial is the doing of the task, the counting of the lightbulbs, not the results’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 18-19). Here, as in Merleau-Ponty, there is a distinction between result and process, just as there is between truth and reality. In this way Meisner says that the foundation of acting is ‘the reality of doing’, rather than the ‘truth of the done’. By this I mean that the result of the activity is unimportant, but reality is achieved through the action that is our way of perceiving the world. In terms of Merleau-Ponty, this is a process of receiving a ‘deformed’ image of the world from the particular perspective of the subject. This shows how observation is very different from the passively receptive condition presented by empiricists that I shall examine more closely in the following section.

We are now equipped to assess Meisner’s attitude to the idea of ‘character’; why actions should not be done as a character, but that character is created out of these actions. In the very first class of his programme, Meisner takes great pains to ensure the students are performing their actions and perceptions as themselves, and not as characters. The first instance of this distinction is observable below:

“...Let me ask you this: did you listen as yourself or were you playing some character?”  
“As myself.”  
“What about you?” he asks a thin, dark girl who looks like a model.  
“At first I was listening as a student.”  
“That’s a character—”  
...  
“Were you listening as Anna?”  
“At the end.”

*"So part of your acting was legitimate and two-thirds of it was pretending."*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 17)

Much later in the training, Meisner confronts the question of character again. He tells the class:

*Vincent just asked me a peculiar question: 'When do we begin on character work?' Well, in one way you never begin on character work. In another way, you've already begun to do characters because character comes from how you feel about something. So every time you got up and did an exercise, you were playing a character, though the word wasn't mentioned. For the most part, character is an emotional thing. The internal part of character is defined by how you feel about something.*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 96-7)

It is significant that it is Vincent (or Vince) who has raised this question, as later in the chapter that this extract is drawn from, he is expelled from the class after Meisner claims that he is unable to teach him (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 113). This episode reveals just how crucial the elimination of the concept of character is for Meisner. Furthermore, the way that Meisner talks about character here reveals that it is a concept that just doesn't fit the paradigm of acting he is working within. This is apparent from the paradoxical way that Meisner says that the actors, 'never begin on character work', but also have been playing characters in every exercise. Furthermore it is driven home by Meisner claiming that he cannot teach Vincent because he refuses to give up his attachment to the concept of character (*ibid*). In a telling exchange with his assistant, Meisner says that Vincent's, 'presence has become detrimental to other students who *are learning*' (*ibid*, emphasis in original). This lends weight to my theory that character is antithetical to the Meisner Technique, because Vincent's very presence in his classroom (and the perspective on theatre that his presence reminds the other students of) is an obstacle to the other students wholeheartedly investing in the processes Meisner is trying to get them to enter into.

This also reinforces my earlier argument that the Meisner Technique is not wholly encapsulated by the objective principles that can be distilled from it, but includes the

particular interaction that he initiates in his classroom. If it was purely an objective process based on rational principles, Vince's, very 'presence', might not be detrimental to the other students' learning as any points he raised might be rationally argued against. As it is Vince's presence that impedes the learning of the other students we can conclude that the training is a subjective process, and therefore Meisner's way of imparting his principles is as much a part of the Technique as the principles themselves. It is for this reason that I give so much weight to those sources of the Meisner Technique that include this element.

With what we have gleaned from Merleau-Ponty's notion of the 'real', we can see what Meisner might be trying to prevent in his students when he asks them to stop acting like a character or 'a student' (which is a type of character). If the real is a deformed image given to the subject by the particular place they occupy, when the student takes on a character they give up their particular position in favour of the abstract position that the conceptual construction of a character might occupy. We can now see that Meisner's elimination of character from his acting method is not an aesthetic choice designed to promote one particular style of theatre over another, but instead goes to the heart of his approach. When an actor plays a character, they recant their own reality; they deny their place in the world and therefore dull their perceptions by seeing them through the abstract intermediaries of intellectual construction. Perception, seen operating through observation, is therefore an active process that determines both the students' zero-point of perception, their body, and the objects of their attention through horizontal syntheses. This process, that immerses the perceiving subject within the world of the perceived object, is the first phase of Meisner's training. As we will see in Chapters Four and Five, Meisner's approach to acting, that excludes the concept of character, can be used to create modern, realist theatre and yet has strong resonances with certain examples of postmodern performance, suggesting that his technique may be a variety of pre-performative training that can establish an attitude that is applicable to various modes of performance.

## Section Two – The Instinctive, Emotional Environment

Now that we have explored the actors' observation of the immediate, concrete environment in the Meisner Technique, I will turn to the instinctive, emotional environment. This might be seen as a separate dimension of the subject's experience but, from a phenomenological perspective, such a separation of concrete and emotional perception is hard to maintain. In this section I will discuss Meisner's prescription of 'foolishness' and see what Merleau-Ponty's argument for the unity of perception and the integrity of the intentional arc can tell us about emotional perception.

Meisner is careful to ensure that his method is understood as a pragmatic process rather than an intellectual exercise. He constantly eschews what he calls, 'all that "head" work', involved in other styles of actor training (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 36). Meisner prescribes a 'foolish' state for his actors in their work. He makes this explicit in his feedback to Lila about a repetition exercise:

*"Now look. You've had plenty of experience, and when you picked up a script in the past, I imagine, your tendency was to read it according to what you thought was the right feeling or mood—call it what you will. Now I'm pulling you away from that habit and I'm saying a simple thing. Be foolish but be repetitive. Keep up the repetition until something happens to you, something that will come right out of you. Right?"*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 47)

Although the last part of this quote deals with the Repetition exercise that I will analyse more closely in the next chapter, I would presently like to call attention to the 'foolish' state that Meisner refers to. He deliberately opposes this foolishness to an intellectual approach, as characterised by, 'what you thought was the right feeling or mood'. This is an example of Meisner keeping to his principle of getting rid of 'all that "head" work' and therefore a direct challenge to an 'intellectual' style of acting. This reaffirms the conclusion I came to at the end

of the last section, where Meisner rejects the concept of an intellectually constructed character.

Meisner makes plain this anti-intellectual approach when he insists that his students react instinctively to their environment. He talks about the ‘instinctive’ basis of his method in a conversation with his assistant: “I’m a very nonintellectual teacher of acting. My approach is based on bringing the actor back to his [sic] emotional impulses and to acting that is firmly rooted in the instinctive. It is based on the fact that all good acting comes from the heart as it were, and that there’s no mentality in it” (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 37). It is important to emphasise that Meisner does not say ‘instinctual’ (‘the inborn tendency to behave in a certain way’), but ‘instinctive’ (‘based on instinct rather than thought or training’) (Brown, 1993: 1382). Meisner’s word choice emphasises the personal significance of action, whereas ‘instinctual’ is associated with biological determinism through its invocation of the phrase ‘inborn tendency’. This adds further evidence to the picture we are establishing of Meisner’s alignment with phenomenological approaches rather than empirical science.

The concepts of ‘emotional impulses’ and ‘the instinctive’ also follow on from the active nature of perception in challenging an empirical worldview; they defy objective categorisation and prescription, taking their power from a multiplicity of factors that combine to produce the phenomena we recognise as impulse and instinct. It is interesting to look at these features from a phenomenological perspective because, on this view, the raw material for analysis is not the collection of these factors, but the effect that they produce. A phenomenological analysis begins from the experience of ‘emotional impulses’ and ‘the instinctive’ as valid targets of inquiry rather than needing to establish their objective truth according to the natural sciences. This pre-reflective or ‘naïve’ attitude that phenomenologists adopt bears a significant resemblance to the ‘foolishness’ that Meisner prescribes for his students.

Another branch of thought that bears directly on this issue is Gestalt Psychology. One of its founders, Wolfgang Köhler, describes the revolution in psychology that led to its emergence:

*In the eighties of the past century, psychologists in Europe were greatly disturbed by von Ehrenfels' claim that thousands of percepts have characteristics which cannot be derived from the characteristics of their ultimate components, the so-called sensations. Chords and melodies in hearing, the shape characteristics of visual objects, the roughness or the smoothness of tactile impressions, and so forth, were used as examples. All these "Gestalt qualities" have one thing in common. When the physical stimuli in question are considerably changed, while their relations are kept constant, the Gestalt qualities remain about the same.*

(Köhler, 1961: 2)

The similarities between phenomenology and gestalt psychology are immediately apparent in the rejection of 'sensations' as a way to explain human experience. One connection that leaps to the fore is Ehrenfels' use of melody as an example of a gestalt experience. This echoes Husserl's detailed examination of the perception of melody in *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (Husserl, 1991: §11). The difference between Husserl's and Ehrenfels' approaches, which is crucial, is that the gestalt psychologist investigates the objects that consciousness grasps, while Husserl interrogates the perception itself. The similarity lies in the fact that they both focus on the effect that configuration has on our grasp of the world. Wertheimer led Gestalt Psychology to focus even more directly on the relationship of objects with one another. Köhler said that Wertheimer,

*...did not ask: How are Gestalt qualities possible when, basically, the perceptual scene consists of separate elements? Rather, he objected to this premise, the thesis that the psychologist's thinking must begin with a consideration of such elements.*

(Köhler, 1961: 2)

We shall soon see how this rejection of the empiricists' atomistic picture, that relies on the consideration of these separate elements, will be taken up by Merleau-Ponty and incorporated into his reinvention of phenomenology. There is, however, one more statement Kohler makes that clarifies the issues under discussion. He says that, 'perceptual groups are established by interactions; and, since a naive observer is merely aware of the result, the perceived groups, but not of their dependence upon particular relations, such interactions would again occur among the underlying processes rather than within the perceptual field' (ibid). This makes it clear that the phenomenologist and the gestalt psychologist are approaching the same, anti-

empiricist, subject matter from different perspectives. While the gestalt psychologist examines the relations of the objects under discussion, the phenomenologist is closer to the ‘naive observer’ who looks at the ‘perceived groups’ rather than the relations that these groups depend upon as they fall outside the ‘perceptual field’. Köhler is apparently claiming gestalt’s supremacy over phenomenology, but it must be noted that he simultaneously foregoes phenomenology’s advantage of a fuller grasp of its target material.

One of the ways Merleau-Ponty reinvigorates phenomenology is by building bridges between it and the natural sciences, and a great example of this is the way he draws heavily on the work of gestalt psychologists. We can see the echoes of the gestalt psychologists in the challenge to intellectualism and empiricism that his argument for the ‘integrity of perception’ presents. In this he attacks the atomistic picture of sensation to which the empiricist reduces perception. He shows how the empiricist presents the act of seeing an object in the following extract:

*Seeing a figure can be only simultaneously experiencing all the atomic sensations which go to form it. Each one remains for ever what it is, a blind content, an impression, while the whole collection of these becomes ‘vision’, and forms a picture before us because we learn to pass quickly from one impression to another.*

(Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 16)

Existing as it does within the operation of a single sensory mechanism, this separation of sensory units must increase exponentially when we introduce each of our other senses. The fact that “an impression can never by itself be associated with another impression” (Merleau-Ponty in Cerbone, 2006: 113), means that these sensations can never be put together in such a way as to account for the richness of perceived experience.

Merleau-Ponty argues that every figure appears against a background that helps to define it. In the same way that a white background helps to define the black writing that appears on it, it is the total perceptual experience that allows us to make meaning from any element within it. He writes that,

*‘When we come back to phenomena we find, as a basic layer of experience, a whole already pregnant with an irreducible meaning:*

*not sensations with gaps between them, into which memories may be supposed to slip, but the features, the layout of a landscape or a word, in spontaneous accord with the intentions of the moment, as with earlier experience.'*

(Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 25)

This is very close to the way gestalt psychologists talk of the 'naive observer' only being aware of the perceived groups, and not the individual percepts that make this up, but the difference in approach (Gestalt Psychology 'objectively' and Phenomenology from a subjective perspective) is maintained.

When we consider the case of multi-sensory perception, for instance hearing a car, seeing it, smelling the exhaust and feeling the breeze as it drives past us, we have several sensory mechanisms, each with their own figure and background (for example, the background of the sense of touch may be the feeling of clothes against our skin that allows the breeze on our exposed flesh generated by the passing car to appear as a figure against it) working in concert to provide us with the perception of a car. Merleau-Ponty argues that such an integrated perception cannot result from the atomistic perspective of units of sensations because the internal connections of the perception cannot logically be caused by the external relations of these units of sensation (Cerbone, 2006: 113).

Empiricism, particularly British empiricism as exemplified by Locke, Hume and Berkeley, emerged as a reaction to extreme scepticism. The work of the Logical Positivists, in particular, brought extreme empiricism into the foundation of the modern scientific method and provided a way that objective truth could supposedly be ascertained through a process of verification. Such a process was intentionally designed to reduce the variable effect that perception introduces to theories about the world (Honnerich, 1995: 227-229). It is ironic that such a reaction to scepticism led to the entrenchment of scientific scepticism that dismisses any features of the world that fall outside its criteria for validity. As we can see, the empiricist does not concern themselves with the process of perception, as they believe that it has no effect on the objective reality of the objects perceived. Merleau-Ponty's description of the

atomistic picture of perception is therefore an extension, possibly to absurdity, of the empiricist's argument about the process of perception. This picture of experience constructed from sensory units is completed by the role of memory as a tool with which cognitive function is able to construct the perceptual experience; according to an empirical account, a car is recognised as a car because we remember sensing the same sorts of things in the past and have learnt that experiences such as these should be known as the experience of a car.

The consequences of Merleau-Ponty's picture of a whole charged with irreducible meaning challenges the validity of this argument. As we noted above, Merleau-Ponty claims that, there are no 'gaps' between parts of experience 'into which memories may be supposed to slip' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 25). Instead of an instrumental memory, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the role of the background, or context, of perception and finds a place within this for the personal significance of the perception. On this view the world is not just a setting for the experience of the object, but is indivisible from it because of the background-figure relationship that exists between them. The object is inherently of its world, of its context, and the idea of perceiving any object in complete isolation from a context is absurd.

Merleau-Ponty's challenge to empiricism does not stop here, but goes on to the level of human experience, the level of culture, including the personal significance of the object to the perceiving subject. For example, a glass of water on my desk has one particular significance to me, but if I were to perceive this same glass of water while suffering from dehydration in a desert, its context would yield a very different meaning. In fact, my perception of the object would include an emotional and instinctive dimension that was very different than when I perceived the glass in the context of less need. This is a fundamental part of what Merleau-Ponty calls the intentional arc:

*...the life of consciousness—cognitive life, the life of desire or perceptual life—is subtended by an 'intentional arc' which projects round about us our past, our future, our human setting, our physical, ideological and moral situation, or rather which results in our being situated in all these respects. It is this intentional arc which brings*

*about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility.*

(Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 157)

Here we can see Merleau-Ponty endowing the intentional arc with the power to situate the subject in terms of their physical, ideological and moral perspectives. Furthermore, he ties these cultural perspectives to the unity of the senses under its banner.

To return to the emotional and instinctive dimensions of observation in Meisner's classroom, we can see how Merleau-Ponty would insist that such aspects of perception are inseparable from the observation of the immediate concrete environment. Meisner doesn't explicitly deal with the emotional dimension of acting until later in the training programme, but the way he conducts the observation exercises suggests that something akin to the intentional arc is unifying the senses. For example, when telling his students to hum a melody to themselves, he says that it should be a melody that they like, a condition that leads the students to discuss their experience in terms of how they were 'enjoying' the melody (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 18). Here their instinctive, emotional relationship to the sound they are creating is clearly an integral part of their immediate, concrete relationship to that sound, just as Merleau-Ponty's 'unity of perception' according to the intentional arc suggests it would be. At a later stage of the training Meisner tells his students, 'You *must* have a reason why you want to do it, because that's the source of your concentration and eventually of your emotion, which comes by itself' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39). In Merleau-Ponty's terms, Meisner is asking them to alter the personal significance that their action holds for them in order to shift their intentional arc. What is interesting is that Meisner claims that their emotion will then come, 'by itself.' This would seem to call upon a unity of perception, much like Merleau-Ponty's, where emotional and instinctive significance can be indirectly affected by a deliberate change in the background of a perception.<sup>2</sup> This shows that Meisner's ideas of emotion and instinct suggest the unity of perception, encompassing both concrete and emotional relations to the world. While gestalt psychology shares a similar concern with the power of the

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<sup>2</sup> A perception must, after all, be experienced through action: 'We experience a perception and its horizon "in action" [pratiquement] rather than by "posing" them or explicitly "knowing" them' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 12).

configuration of the whole, it approaches this from an objective standpoint. Such a discourse has limitations for the analysis of the Meisner Technique as Meisner's early exercises work to emphasise the role of subjectivity, and specifically the importance of perspective, in his acting method.

## Section Three – The Abstract Environment

Because modern, realist theatre, the paradigm from which the Meisner Technique emerged, is concerned with fictional representation, any discussion of this Technique must address this. While this chapter aims to get as close to the 'real' experiences of the actor as possible, it must not be forgotten that in the context of modern, realist theatre, Meisner's Techniques are made to serve the production of a fictional narrative that encourages the audience to read the actors as characters, the stage set as a fictional place, and the events that occur as unique and irrevocable happenings with real consequences within that fictional world. The effect of an audience's gaze on the performer will be discussed in the next chapter, but I would now like to explore the fictional, or abstract, level of the actor's environment. I will discuss the way that Meisner's Independent Activity exercise introduces abstract elements into his method, and then use Merleau-Ponty's description of *Zeigen* movements in the pathological case of Schneider to see how this may be affecting the perceptual processes that occur in Meisner's classroom.

Meisner stresses that 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing', and strips away many of the concepts that actors traditionally use to talk about their work. The prime example of this is his dismissal of 'character' at the very outset of his training. The 'character' is something that allows actors to talk about the fiction of the play, while keeping themselves separate from it. As we have seen from Meisner's opening exercises, he ensures that his students are performing their tasks as themselves, not as characters; he claims that their acting is only 'legitimate' when they fulfil this requirement (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 17).

Throughout this chapter, I have described Meisner's training as a process that orients his students to an effective relationship with their work. Seen in this way, the prime reason Meisner strips 'character' from his students' practical vocabulary is that it muddles their perspective and therefore dims their perception of the world. However, as the style of theatre Meisner was working towards contained representational elements, there might appear to be a contradiction between the 'imaginative' or 'abstract' elements necessary and the rigorously established 'reality' of the acting space. Although the fictional dimension of acting is only required when the performer is working with a script and within a certain paradigm of theatre, Meisner incorporates it into the early exercises of his training. This suggests that despite first impressions, the abstract dimension of theatre may not be diametrically opposed to a concrete grasp of 'reality'.

It is important that we hold onto the phenomenological idea of the 'unity of perception'. In Merleau-Ponty's version of phenomenology, this unity of perception comes under the umbrella of the, 'intentional arc' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 157). From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the abstract aspects of the actor's performance form a part of their intentional arc, so rather than standing in opposition to the concrete reality of the actor, they work together with it to contribute to their total experience.

Setting aside the hypothetical scenarios that Meisner discusses in order to illustrate certain exercises, the first time he directly addresses the imaginative component of the training is in the Independent Activity exercise. We will explore the Independent Activity exercise and the relationship that this establishes between the actor and their actions more comprehensively in Chapter Three, but it can contribute to our discussion here by combining a concrete engagement with the world with an abstract condition. As befits Meisner's practical approach, he introduces Independent Activities by instructing one of his students to perform the exercise before he explains the rules or principles that underpin it. He asks Vince to imagine that he has been invited to stay the night with a beautiful girl, but that he has lost her phone number

and so must hunt through the Manhattan phone book for a K. Z. Smith who lives in the upper seventies (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39). After Vince has done this activity during a Repetition exercise, Meisner explains the concept to the class:

*I want all of you to choose something to do which is above all difficult, if not almost impossible. This is very important. You have to have a reason why you want to do it. You must have a reason why you want to do it, because that's the source of your concentration and eventually of your emotion, which comes by itself.*

(ibid)

The two principles at play in the above direction are that the activity must be difficult, and the student must have a reason why they want to do it, and it is the second of these conditions that bears directly on the abstract dimension of the actor's experience. I will return a close analysis of Independent Activities in Chapter Three, but for now I would like to focus on Meisner's instruction that, 'You must have a reason why you want to do it' (ibid). The simplicity of this statement effectively minimizes the moment that abstract or imaginary material is first incorporated into Meisner's training programme. Meisner phrases his instruction in terms of the individual students, making it barely distinguishable from the earlier exercises in which he told them to listen, 'just for yourself', and hum a tune, 'just to yourself.' What is downplayed in the new exercise is that 'the reason why' is not necessarily real for them. Meisner confirms this by saying that, 'To be inventive, to have ideas is an organic part of being talented' (ibid). The invention Meisner mentions here is the first time that he asks his students to work with anything that is not already physically present in the room, or already part of their physical body. Meisner may be minimizing the importance of this shift for pragmatic reasons, in that he may want the students to keep the 'reality of doing' as their primary focus. While I believe there may be some truth in this, I think that a more compelling reason for playing down the introduction of imaginative elements is that they are not fundamentally opposed to the concrete reality that has been the focus of the training until this point.

Given the resonances between Meisner's Technique and elements of certain 'phenomenologies', it is a fair working proposition that Meisner's treatment of 'imaginative' or 'abstract' features of experience bears some resemblance to a phenomenological approach. Merleau-Ponty makes a close analysis of the difference between concrete and abstract tasks through the pathological case of Schneider, a soldier who received a shrapnel injury to his brain in the First World War. Schneider was originally studied by the gestalt psychologist Adhémar Gelb and the neuroscientist Kurt Goldstein, and Merleau-Ponty bases his arguments on their observations (Cerbone, 2006: 126). Schneider's condition meant that he was no longer able to perform a certain class of actions. The first part of Merleau-Ponty's argument defines those features that distinguish the actions that Schneider can no longer perform from those that he is able to carry out without any apparent difficulty. Merleau-Ponty concludes that Schneider is unable to perform *Zeigen* ('pointing') movements, while maintaining his ability to practice *Greifen* ('grasping') tasks. The *Zeigen* movements roughly correspond to abstract actions, for example being told to point to the part of their body the doctor touches with a ruler. The *Greifen* movements, on the other hand, are associated with concrete actions such as the manipulation of physical material that Schneider's job of making wallets on an assembly line requires<sup>3</sup>.

Schneider's case is made especially pertinent to my discussion of the Meisner Technique by Merleau-Ponty's analysis of his inability to pretend or 'play-act'. Merleau-Ponty claims that this inability to pretend is a consequence of his losing the ability to perform *Zeigen* movements; he argues that what Schneider lacks is an abstract space around himself into which he can project himself (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 128). He says that Schneider can only pretend to salute like a soldier if he is able to make the situation more 'soldier-like', thereby making the imaginary elements as concrete as possible.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the division between *Zeigen* and *Greifen* tasks is not always entirely clear. For example, while Schneider is not easily able to point to a place on his body tapped by the doctor's ruler, he is able to slap away a mosquito that bites him. Such fine differences do not, however, challenge the validity of the concept of abstract space that we shall now examine.

The reason that pathological cases, such as Schneider's, are useful to a discussion of the perception of less impaired people is that in the places where such cases diverge from our own experience, they highlight particular features of the structure of our perception by the contrast that they offer to it. Schneider's inability to perform simple, abstract operations without preparing himself through practice or translating them into concrete actions does not necessarily tell us that there are two classes of actions that uninjured people are able to perform, but rather that for most people the distinction between abstract and concrete actions is less definite. If we take the example of performing a soldier's salute, we can see that it is neither completely concrete, nor absolutely abstract; there is the imaginary element of a soldier's situation, which is not concrete, and there is the concrete element of the body's manipulation, which is not abstract. Schneider is therefore able to 'play-act' if he is able to minimise the abstract dimension of the activity, and emphasise the concrete elements of it. In this way the case of Schneider illustrates the unity of abstract and concrete perception in the average person by pointing to their separation in the pathological case. Merleau-Ponty says, 'for the normal person, every movement is, indissolubly, movement and consciousness of movement. This can be expressed by saying that for the normal person every movement has a *background*, and that the movement and its background are 'moments of a unique totality' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 127). It is not accidental that this talk of background recalls Merleau-Ponty's arguments for the unity of perception. Here Merleau-Ponty is making explicit what we discovered through our discussion of instinctive and emotional observation in section two – that every perception involves both a figure and a background. We can now see that abstract, imaginary elements can form part of this background, and in the average person the distinction between the concrete and abstract aspects of this background is not of a binary order.

Meisner ties 'instinct' to the personal significance that the context or background of an object lends it. He makes this clear when he says, 'You walk into a store and see a dress. "That's for me!" That's instinct' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 30). In this scenario, the context of the

object gives it a personal significance that raises the subject's perception of it above a simple, objective view. What we can now add to Merleau-Ponty's unity of perception is the imaginary circumstance. In the earlier example of Vince searching through the Manhattan phone book for K.Z. Smith, we can see the imaginary circumstance of sex with a beautiful girl forming part of the background of his perception of the phone book, and changing the quality of his interaction with it. The narrator of *Sanford Meisner on Acting* says that Vince, 'quickly becomes absorbed in the task... a task made more difficult by Anna's insistent pursuit of playing the word game. The result is that the dialogue is more focused, and there are more impulsive shifts in its direction, more surprises' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39). This is an early example of imaginary circumstances enriching the background of a perception which in turn affects the actions of the actor as both, 'movement and consciousness of movement' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 127).

Meisner labels the commitment to imaginary circumstances 'actor's faith'. Later in his training programme he discusses Maureen Stapleton's possession of this attribute. He says that she has great actor's faith because she believes the imaginary circumstances to be true and finds a way to eliminate any doubt about them (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 61). This illustrates that Meisner would advocate the actor dismissing any substantive difference between the abstract and concrete aspects of their environment in the moment of performance.

When we look at the issue of the abstract and the concrete in Merleau-Ponty, we see that he does not assimilate abstract and concrete acts to the extent that Meisner would ask his actors to. Even though abstract and concrete features of the world blend in the perception of the average subject, he asserts that they are distinguishable upon reflection. To begin with, he says that the background to concrete movements is 'given', whereas the background to abstract movements is, 'built up' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 127). This connects with the work that Meisner implies is necessary when he says that the actor needs to invent specific details about their circumstances within the play. He says that when, 'It doesn't say in the text ...

[y]ou've got to make it up out of your imagination' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39).

However, in Meisner's Technique it is clear that this invention must be done in preparation for a performance, so that when the actor is on stage they are able to believe that the 'built up' world of the imaginary circumstances are merely 'given'.

Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the 'built up' nature of abstract movement, and claims that it,

*carves out within that plenum of the world in which concrete movement took place a zone of reflection and subjectivity; it superimposes upon physical space a virtual or human space. Concrete movement is therefore centripetal whereas abstract movement is centrifugal. The former occurs in the realm of being or of the actual, the latter on the other hand in that of the virtual or the non-existent; the first adheres to a given background, the second throws out its own background. The normal function which makes abstract movement possible is 'projection' whereby the subject of movement keeps in front of him an area of free space in which what does not naturally exist may take on a semblance of existence.*

(Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 128)

It should be noted, however, that this is a secondary analysis of a first-hand account of experience and does not imply that the subject is necessarily conscious of the different directions of activity when performing actions. Meisner's prescription would suggest that the centrifugal or projecting activity is prepared for at an earlier stage of the actors work, so that when performing, abstract movements can become as centripetal as concrete ones, in that they draw toward the actor a world that is already built up. When we translate this concept back into the discourse Merleau-Ponty is creating, it might be said that the Meisner actor works to become more like Schneider, in that they make the abstract actions they are required to perform more concrete by preparation and conscious construction of the background required before they undertake the action. This process is observable in the Independent Activity exercise of Vincent looking through the Manhattan phone book for K. Z. Smith's phone number. By the conscious construction of a fictional background in which Vincent has been invited to spend the night with a beautiful girl, and the concrete task of searching for a number in a phone book, he is able to make a fictional scene more concrete for himself.

In this chapter I have laid out a number of phenomenological interpretations of the Meisner actor's observation of their environment. Although we are discussing this in isolation from the other aspects of the actor's experience that I am covering in the following two chapters, it is important to note that the unity of perception and the integrity of the intentional arc tell us that, from the perspectives that I am occupying, each of the aspects of the actor's perception are interdependent and therefore do not yield a complete picture when examined in isolation. As we pursue the actors' encounter with each other, and their engagement with actions in the following two chapters, we will reintegrate our discoveries and compose a cross-category account of the experience of an actor practising the Meisner Technique. This composite picture of Meisner's acting methodology will allow us to recognise that while it was devised to enable the production of modern, realist theatre, the processes it instigates resonate strongly with certain examples of postmodern performance. Such an analysis of the Meisner Technique suggests a number of continuities between these divergent paradigms of theatre/performance.

A phenomenological examination of observation in Meisner's classroom tells us many things. Firstly there are many points of convergence between Meisner's method and phenomenological perspectives, but they do not align completely, and so do not collapse into one another. Secondly, Meisner's training can be seen as a process of orientation whereby the students are anchored in their particular perspective on the world through their body and their grasp of their immediate, concrete environment. Also, the emotional and abstract aspects of the actor's environment can be seen to be united with their concrete grasp of the world through the unity of perception and the integrity of 'the intentional arc'. In the following chapter we will shift focus to the dynamic the Meisner Technique creates between acting partners through the Repetition exercise. This is, in turn, built upon the relationship between the actor and their environment that we have investigated here through an analysis of Meisner's observation exercises. We will complete our account of the three key aspects of the Meisner actor's experience in Chapter Three by examining their relationship to action through

a comprehensive analysis of the Independent Activity exercise. In Chapter Four we will demonstrate how these interdependent aspects of experience coalesce in the performance of modern, realist theatre, and Chapter Five will show that Meisner's Technique resists circumscription by this paradigm of theatre by delineating some of the resonances it exhibits with the postmodern field. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight will juxtapose the processes of the Meisner Technique with three specific postmodern directors and suggest the beginnings of discourses between their respective practices.

# Repetition

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Two actors face each other in a classroom. They stand three metres apart, looking at one another. One actor says, “Your hair is shiny.” The second repeats, “Your hair is shiny.” The first actor repeats the phrase, and the repetition continues until the teacher tells them stop (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 21). This simple routine is the beginning of Meisner’s Repetition exercise, the tool he uses to establish a specific relationship between actors that will ultimately enable them to actualise modern, realist theatre. However, as we shall see in the course of this chapter, the processes instigated by this exercise are not necessarily tied to this mode of performance and, in fact, have strong resonances with certain forms of postmodern performance. This analysis of the Repetition exercise therefore demonstrates that the Meisner Technique exhibits continuities between two paradigms of theatre/performance.

Firstly I will discuss the general approach to ‘The Other’ in Meisner’s classroom and introduce the distinct interpretations of this that are suggested by the perspectives of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. I will then discuss Meisner’s invention of the exercise, and the terms he employs when he describes it to his students in order to understand the wider context from which it emerged. I will then describe the phenomenological dimension of the successive stages of the repetition exercise: ‘Mechanical Repetition’, ‘Repetition from Your Own Point of View’, ‘Impulsive Changes’, ‘The Three Moment Exercise’, and ‘Meaningful Moment to Meaningful Moment’. At each of these stages I will compare my descriptions with the contrasting perspectives of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas in order to see the ways the exercise might be shaping the perception of the actor and thereby allowing them to craft their behaviour to suit the needs of the mode of performance they are working within. By the end of this chapter I will have shown how one actor’s encounter with another might enable them to craft a performance, as opposed to simply trying to be something other than themselves for the audience.

It is worthwhile reiterating here that while the target of my investigation is the Meisner Technique, from a phenomenological point of view the particular ways that the principles of the Technique are conveyed are as much a part of the Technique as the principles themselves. Because of this the Meisner Technique is best understood by fixing a close attention on to how Sanford Meisner teaches the Technique. This is not to imply that the versions of the Technique taught by Scott Williams, William Esper and others are not valid adaptations of the Technique, but that they are necessarily different from the Technique that Sanford Meisner taught. Rather than trying to discover an ‘authentic practice’ I acknowledge the relativity of Meisner’s Technique with that of the other teachers who have been influenced by him. While it would be a valid project to put the picture I create into play with the versions of the Meisner Technique taught by others, such an exercise is outside the boundaries of this work. My central assertion that justifies these boundaries is that to discuss the Meisner Technique in a full sense we need to acknowledge that both the principles Meisner teaches and the way in which he teaches them are integral facets of the Technique itself. Accordingly I base my analysis where possible on sources that include both of these elements, specifically *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, *Sanford Meisner: Theatre’s Best Kept Secret*, and *Masterclass*.

The issue of ‘The Other’ is significant throughout the history of Western philosophy (the ‘problem of other minds’ for example (Honderich, 1995: 637-638)), and it is a prominent area of debate in the complimentary discourses of existentialism and phenomenology. In Meisner’s approach to acting, the frisson generated in an encounter with The Other provides much of the fuel for the on-going operation of the actor’s work and the direction that it takes. I will first describe the various ‘gazes’ operating in Meisner’s classroom and discuss the different ways that each is treated. I will then draw from the work of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas to juxtapose some contrasting analyses of these processes.

There are three major categories of gaze working on the actor in Meisner’s classroom. To simplify matters I will ignore the gaze of Meisner’s assistant. The first and most obvious gaze is

Meisner's own, which we have evidence of through his feedback on the exercises undertaken by the students. The second type of gaze comes from the students who watch the exercises proceed. This gaze works in a similar manner to an audience's gaze, but it should be noted that they are a highly specialised audience, interested in the mechanics of the acting technique rather than the broader concerns of spectatorship. The final gaze on the actor in Meisner's classroom is that of the acting partner. For most of Meisner's lessons the actors are put into pairs to perform exercises and scenes, meaning that this distinct class of gaze comes from a co-participant in the exercise or scene. What is important to establish is that the Meisner Technique attempts to mitigate the effects of the audience's gaze, while embracing and taking strength from the gaze of the acting partner.

Meisner makes his most significant comment on the effect that others' observation has on the actor is when he discusses Stanislavsky's idea of 'public solitude'. When trying to stop a student called Bruce from playing to the audience, he asks,

*what makes you audience-conscious? Stanislavsky, no slouch, had a phrase which he called 'public solitude'. He said that when you're alone in your room and nobody's watching you—you're just standing in front of the mirror combing your hair—the relaxation, the completeness with which you do it is poetic. He calls this relaxed behavior on the stage 'public solitude.' On the stage 'public solitude' is what we want. You have only one element to give up to get to the area where your real acting personality is, and that is yourself.*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 43-44)

Meisner's allusion here is to Stanislavsky's concept of 'solitude in public', and is drawn from the chapter entitled, 'Concentration of Attention' in *An Actor Prepares*. Here 'solitude in public' is used to describe the smallest circle of attention the actor can inhabit. The Director describes this state by saying, 'You are in public because we are all here. It is solitude because you are divided from us by a small circle of attention. During a performance, before an audience of thousands, you can always enclose yourself in this circle like a snail in its shell' (Stanislavsky, 1937: 82). Given this context, we can see that Meisner is attempting to make

Bruce concentrate on the area immediately about him, and not play to the class. In doing so, Meisner is attempting to minimize the effect the class' gaze, as well as his own, has on Bruce.

The case of the acting partner is very different however. From very early in partner work, when the Repetition exercise escalates to 'the pinch and the ouch', Meisner tells his students that the two principles are, "*Don't do anything unless something happens to make you do it.*" That's one of them. The second is: '*What you do doesn't depend on you; it depends on the other fellow.*' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 34, emphasis in original). What is striking about this statement is the actor's absolute dependence on their acting partner. The first point that should be noted is that Meisner includes the acting partner within the small circle of concentration described in Stanislavsky's 'solitude in public', or that he partially widens this circle of attention to include them. Furthermore, if everything the actor does depends on 'The Other' in the form of the acting partner, the dynamic between the subject and The Other is fundamental to his Technique. Meisner expands on this relationship once his students have gotten used to the 'pinch and ouch' level of repetition. On his prompting, Joseph (another student) summarises that, 'The meaning is in the behavior. You don't do anything until that behavior makes you do something' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 42). This might initially suggest an empirical interpretation of interpersonal relations, in which only verifiable physical movements in their partner should cause the actor to react. However, it is important to remember that these partner exercises take place between two actors, working off each other, and therefore by asking each actor to focus on the behaviour of their partner, the Meisner Technique is activating their gaze upon each other. Thus it may not be the behaviour of the partner that is the sole crucial element in this dynamic, but the fact that each actor is also open and receptive to that behaviour. This reading of the interaction between the participants of the Repetition exercise moves away from an empirical approach by focusing more on process than result.

Merleau-Ponty has an optimistic picture of the encounter with the other. He believes that because we recognise The Other as another subject with the same power of perception and creativity as us, we have a relationship of communion. He says that the Other,

*born in the midst of my phenomena, appropriates [my phenomena] and treats them in accord with typical behaviors which I myself have experienced. ... [T]he body of the other ... tears itself away from being one of my phenomena, offers me the task of true communication, and confers on my objects the new dimension of intersubjective being or, in other words, of objectivity.*

(Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 18)

Thus, Merleau-Ponty contends that through communication, with a shared language and culture, we are able to transcend our perceptual reality and approach objects as quasi-objective entities. On this view, the gaze is not threatening, but potentially empowering.

The context of Levinas' perspective on The Other is his more general opposition to 'totalizing' theories of the world. He believes that when a philosopher tries to formulate a theory which accounts for everything, they effectively enslave the world within their own perspective (Cerbone, 2006: 137). The only time that such totalising theories falter is when the subject comes 'face to face' with the Other (Levinas, 1969: 199). Because The Other escapes our grasp of them, they are fundamentally different from us, an argument that challenges Merleau-Ponty's picture of communion. The subject is forced from an ontological interpretation of the Other, to an ethical approach to them because of their inability to completely grasp them. However, once The Other's 'infinity of ... transcendence' is acknowledged, discourse is possible (*ibid*). Furthermore, Levinas claims that discourse is superior to comprehension (that a totalising theory might offer) in that it 'relates with what is essentially transcendent' (Levinas, 1969: 195). Meisner's Technique derives aspects of its dynamic from each of these perspectives on the encounter with The Other (communal and ethical), and each therefore illuminates different aspects of his training.

Meisner says that he invented the Repetition exercise as a reaction to Group Theatre improvisations in which they would say, in their own words, what they remembered of the

story. He claimed that this became overly-intellectual, and prevented the actors from living truthfully in performance. He wanted an exercise that would strip away all this thinking and allow the actor to work from their impulses. After considering this problem over a hospital stay, he came to the conclusion that if someone is listening to another person, and repeating what they hear, they are not thinking (Meisner, 2006: 3:40). Because the Repetition exercise was a reaction to Group Theatre improvisations, it is often categorised as an improvisation, which is true up to a point. The difference between the Repetition exercise and improvisations in general, and the Group Theatre improvisations in particular, is that the Repetition exercise is not based around a predetermined subject. In theatre improvisation is normally the spontaneous creation of a particular scene, and in musical terms it usually occurs around a central theme, set of chords, or composition. The Repetition exercise is different from these scenarios, because although it is improvisation in the sense that it is spontaneous behaviour, it is not based on a pre-existing theme or subject. In comparison to the Group Theatre improvisations that Meisner was reacting against, where the focus was on a particular scene from a certain play, Meisner's Repetition exercise focuses on the behaviour of the actors and the dynamic that the improvisation creates between them. This turns the focus away from the content of the improvisation to the process of the improvisation itself. As Meisner leads his students through the different phases of Repetition, the exercise appears more and more like a dramatic scene but, until the final stage, Meisner continually reinforces the idea that it is an exercise and not a scene (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 65).

This begs the question of why, if Meisner is teaching acting, he refuses to allow his students to 'act' in the traditional sense throughout the early stages of the class. If my contention is correct, we will discover that the Meisner Technique is stripping away the outer forms of theatricality in order to orient his students to a particular way of engaging with the world and their fellow performers. While this is specifically intended to serve the needs of modern, realist theatre, the process involved has echoes in the work of certain postmodern practitioners, suggesting continuities between these diverse fields of practice.

The first level, the ‘mechanical’ form of Repetition, appears very much like the description at the start of this chapter. Two actors face each other, one says something about the appearance of the other that strikes them, the second actor repeats this verbatim, the first actor repeats exactly what the second actor says, and so on. There are, however, two conditions that Meisner adds to the exercise. The first is that it should be a physical, rather than an emotional observation (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 21). This further strips away the ‘mentality’ from the exercise, as if the actor sticks to naming what they physically see, they do not have to resort to trying to conclude anything from their observation. For example, if a student’s partner was frowning, and they say, “You are unhappy with me”, there are many steps of reasoning that have to occur: the frown has to be noticed, the actor has to realise that this is a sincerely unhappy form of behaviour, the target of this unhappiness has to be identified, and all of this has to be reduced down to the concluding observation, “You are unhappy with me.” However, if the actor was to see their partner’s frown and confine themselves to saying, “You are frowning”, deduction is eliminated and the process is reduced to two steps – seeing and speaking. Each actor, in turn, then goes through the same two-step routine of listening to their partner and repeating what they hear, thereby tying their observations directly to their action and minimizing any intermediary steps.

Meisner adds a second condition to the exercise when he tells his students not to make readings in order to create variety. This means that the students should not change the emphasis of the words in order to alter their meaning. In actual fact this is less a condition than it is a clarification of the instruction to listen to your partner and repeat *exactly* what you hear. For example, Meisner intervenes in the following repetition exercise:

“**Your hair is shiny.**”

“**Your hair is shiny.**”

“**Your hair is shiny.**”

“No,” says Meisner stopping them, “you’re making readings in order to create variety. Don’t.”

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: ibid, emphasis in original)

For simplicity's sake, we could describe the process of 'Mechanical Repetition' in the following way: the first person observes their partner and states a fact about them, and from that point on, each actor listens to their partner and repeats what they hear. After his students have completed several exercises to Meisner's satisfaction, he says,

*"It's mechanical, it's inhuman, but it's the basis for something. It's monotonous, but it's the basis for something ... It's empty, it's inhuman, right? But it has something in it. It has connection. Aren't they listening to each other? That's the connection. It's a connection which comes from listening to each other, but it has no human quality—yet."*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 22)

A crucial aspect of Meisner's observation here is that he claims that the 'connection' between the actors comes from their activity of listening to each other rather than the words they say. This subverts the readily apparent interpretation that it is the more obviously active part of the actors' interaction, communicating their observations, that creates the connection. It does, however, resonate strongly with what we discovered in the last chapter where, according to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, a human being 'haunts' space through an infinite number of potential motor projects extending from them into their environment. When the actors listened to the cars passing by outside the class room they were actualising one of these motor projects and therefore engaging in worldly action despite taking an apparently receptive stance in relation to it. Now that Meisner says that the connection between two actors in the Repetition exercise comes from this engagement in the world through sensory reception we can see the strong parallels it bears to phenomenological views of the world. This suggests that Meisner refuses to allow his students to act (in the theatrical sense) during the Repetition exercise in order to establish an authentic connection between two people by making them listen to one another without thinking. The very word 'act' carries with it the connotation of action that might suggest a more self-consciously outgoing type of action than the sensory receptivity of listening. It is because listening creates the connection necessary for

performance in Meisner's Technique that he definitively shifts the attention of the actor towards this by telling them to 'stop acting!' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 54).

In the classroom, Meisner moves to the next phase of the Repetition exercise as soon as the students have understood and experienced this connection to his satisfaction. However, despite its simplicity, the mechanical phase of the Repetition exercise holds within it much complexity from a phenomenological point of view and we must discover what is achieved by this 'inhuman', 'mechanical' activity that allows it to act as the 'basis' for what will follow. Perhaps the most significant function of this level of Repetition is that it strips the words of their meaning, primarily by denying perspective. If one actor says, "Your hair is shiny", and the second repeats, "Your hair is shiny", not only is it probably not true in the second instance, but by making the real observation untrue, simply by repeating it, the validity of the first (identical) statement is called into question. Every successive statement, being a repetition as opposed to an original observation, further reduces the meaning of the words being uttered as they are further and further removed from the original observation. This decay of meaning is interesting because it directly contradicts a strong current in the discussion of 'Method Acting' (in the general sense that includes Meisner) that identifies the imperative for actors trained in these methodologies to perform real acts in performance.

An article that bears directly on this issue is, 'How to Do Things on Stage', in which David Saltz discusses the possibility of performing 'real acts' on stage in the context of 'Speech Act Theory' that effectively limits the argument to the success of illocutionary acts contained within utterance acts (Saltz, 1991: 43). Meisner's assertion that, 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing', would seem to suggest that Saltz is right to say that Meisner-trained actors are aiming to give their utterance acts illocutionary force. However, when Meisner lays the foundation for his acting methodology in an exercise that intentionally destroys any illocutionary force contained within his students' utterance acts, it is clear that things are not as straightforward as Saltz makes out. None of this should lead us to question the sincerity of

Meisner's claim that, 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing', but it does emphasise the different attitude Meisner has to performing 'real acts' and speaking words. This distinction invalidates Saltz's reduction of 'real actions' to Speech Act Theory and calls for a broader approach that takes into account more than the words being spoken. To find a more appropriate perspective, we need to refer back to the 'authentic connection' of listening that Meisner claimed this level of the Repetition exercise produces. We saw in the Observation chapter how the students relate to their environment through active observation, but now we come to a fundamentally different experience, encountering another subject through active observation. By dealing directly with the perceptual experience of the actor the phenomenological platform that we have been building up provides a more incisive critical framework than Speech Act Theory alone can offer. Accordingly, through the rest of this chapter I will provide a phenomenological response to the key moments of Saltz's argument.

Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the 'intentional arc' and the 'unity of perception' give us productive perspectives on the experience of the students engaged in the mechanical level of Repetition. In this phase of the exercise the first speaker is confronted with another person about whom they must make an observation. As we saw in the last chapter, Merleau-Ponty asserts that observations about the world do not occur in isolation, but are part of an intentional arc that encompasses the physical environment, the subject's motility (potential for action), as well as their cultural and ideological background. It is within this context that the encounter with The Other takes place. Therefore, when one actor says to the other, "Your hair is shiny", this is not an isolated fact, but something that the whole intentional arc of the speaker leads them to treat as the foreground of their perception. It is important to note here that it is the actor's own personal perception of the world that dictates the observation that comes to the foreground and forms the basis of their statement. However, this holistic intentional arc is not stated, only the fore-grounded element from it.

As soon as the actor makes this observation, they tell the other actor what it is about them that they have noted. Up to this point the illocutionary force of the utterance is the same as any real speech act. However, the other actor is not receiving the statement as one would in everyday life. Instead of listening to the meaning of the words, they are listening with the very specific intention of repeating exactly what they hear. In this case the intention of the listener thwarts the illocutionary force of the utterance act.

Before we progress any further with this phenomenological description of the mechanical phase of the repetition exercise, we first need to isolate the new element that it brings into the actors' perception – The Other. Merleau-Ponty does not treat the encounter with The Other as fundamentally different from the rest of perception and his perspective is a very useful one precisely because of this. Merleau-Ponty claims that the encounter with The Other arises naturally in the midst of other phenomena when he writes that, 'From the depths of my subjectivity I see another subjectivity invested with equal rights appear, because the behavior of the other takes place within my perceptual field' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 17-18). This makes it clear that the other subject appears to the perceiver as a subject firstly because their behaviour takes place within the perceiver's perceptual field. In fact, according to the unity of perception and the intentional arc, this behaviour can only be recognised as heralding the emergence of another subject because of the context of the encounter. In the mechanical phase of the Repetition exercise, the context is deliberately altered. The first speaker is not observing the second as a fully emancipated subject, free to act as they wish, as this would require a greater level of deduction and interpretation than Meisner allows. Instead, they objectify their partner and treat them as a purely physical object to be described as any other object in the room might be.

Now that we have established that the first step of the mechanical phase of repetition is not a fully-fledged encounter with The Other, we can complete the phenomenological description of the following steps of Mechanical Repetition. In the second, and every subsequent, step of

this phase of the repetition exercise, once the second person has listened to the words the first person has spoken and the illocutionary force of these words has been denied, they must say these words back to the first person. The major difference from the first step of the exercise is that there is never any intention for the words to hold meaning; it is merely a physical act, devoid of any intention to communicate.

If the whole idea of communication between subjects is denied by the Repetition exercise, what can possibly be the basis for the ‘connection’ that Meisner claims will form the foundation of what is to follow? If listening is separated from the reception of meaning, what can the contact be? This exercise from the Meisner Technique distils the contact between two people down to the basic level of listening and simultaneously minimises the dimension of intersubjective being. This frees the participants from the obligation to communicate, interpret, or relate. This is acknowledged by Meisner himself when he claims that this phase of the exercise is, ‘mechanical, it’s inhuman ... It’s a connection which comes from listening to each other, but it has no human quality—yet’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 22). As we have said above, this phase of the exercise ties observation to action and minimizes any intermediary steps between the two. The connection that is established is of listening, but it is not a ‘human’ or intersubjective connection yet.

The second phase of the repetition exercise, ‘Repetition from Your Own Point of View’, begins to move the participants from this inhuman connection towards one that takes account of the presence of The Other. Meisner says that this is, ‘where the trouble comes in’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 22), which goes some way to acknowledging the complexity of the confrontation with The Other. He introduces this stage of the exercise in the following exchange:

*He turns to a young woman wearing her brown hair in a thick braid.  
“You have an embroidered blouse. Is that true?”  
“No.”  
“Then what’s the answer?”  
“No, I do not have an embroidered blouse.”*

*That's right!" he says. "That is the repetition from her point of view. Immediately it becomes a contact between two human beings."*

(ibid, emphasis in original)

This very simple demonstration belies the hidden complexity that it enacts. The only thing that has changed is that the person listening, instead of repeating what they hear verbatim, now repeat the statement from their own point of view. This re-introduces the distinct perspectives of the two participants, and in doing so unlocks a number of elements that are tied to them. Firstly identity is established and the subject is once again distinguished from The Other. To take the example from earlier in this chapter, if the first person says, "Your hair is shiny," the second person might reply, "My hair is shiny." This shows that all that might change is the substitution of pronouns to indicate identity but, as we shall see shortly, this issue of identity brings a number of consequences with it.

The other change that this level of the exercise introduces is that communication is once again possible, and therefore the illocutionary force that David Saltz describes comes into play. However, Mechanical Repetition's disassociation of speaking from communication has shown us that the links between speaking, action, identity, and communication are far more nuanced than his picture allows for. The most glaring challenge to Saltz's analysis is the fact that at the same moment that communication becomes possible perspectives can clash, truth claims can be disputed and therefore illocutionary force (which depends upon reception as much as expression) is once again challenged. Saltz illustrates how the reception of an utterance partially determines its illocutionary force with the following example:

*Hence a play seems to establish a deviant causal chain: the speaker asks for a cigarette, the listener gives him one, but the first event does not cause the second. The utterance's force as a real act seems to break down at precisely this point.*

(Saltz, 1991: 36)

In defence of Saltz, it might be claimed that his analysis applies to scripted plays and not improvisations such as the Repetition exercise. However, this is precisely the point on which his analysis derails because it treats the actor as an object of the fictional narrative. He asks

how an actor who knows his character's intention will be thwarted can give his dialogue real illocutionary force. In doing this he leaps straight to the final moment, the performance, where an actor's intentions (those of a subject) may be in conflict with the character's (those of an object) without pausing to consider what constitutes these beings as subject and object respectively. By distinguishing these two entities here, we can see how the illocutionary force of the actor need not be thwarted by the supposed intentions of the character that they may be representing.

If we connect the two statements that make up the first example of 'Repetition from Your Own Point of View', we can see all of this complexity revealing itself: "You have an embroidered blouse." ... "No, I do not have an embroidered blouse" (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 22). The first statement shows Meisner making an inaccurate observation about his student, and the second is evidence of the student listening to the statement, and repeating its content after judging its validity.

If the Meisner Technique incorporates an element of deliberation and judgement in the second phase of the Repetition exercise, it is worth asking why it was excluded this from the first phase. The foundation that is established by the first phase of the Repetition exercise is one of listening without thought. The second phase builds directly upon this listening, but teaches the students to respond directly according to the reality (though not necessarily truth) of their own perspective. The way Meisner introduces this phase of the exercise suggests the answer to the question; he does not ask the students to tell their partner whether their observation was correct or not, he does not tell them to judge or consider what their partner has told them, but merely tells them to repeat the phrase from their own perspective and coaches the student in the first example to include the validity of the statement from her own perspective in her answer. In doing this he is breaking down any reliance on objective truth, on any need to be correct, and therefore dismisses the need to make their actions depend on abstract reason, but encourages them to base them upon subjective perspective instead. As

we saw Merleau-Ponty state in the Observation chapter, subjective reality is very distinct from truth and is anchored in the perspective of the individual rather than an objective perspective that is constructed after the individual perspective has been experienced.

A picture is beginning to emerge of the Repetition exercise as a tool employed in order to establish a connection between contrasting subjectivities. It is now that all of the existential and phenomenological complexity of an encounter with The Other is evoked. We saw above how Merleau-Ponty treated the subject's encounter with The Other as embedded within their grasp of the world as a whole and that The Other is recognized as a subject because they display behaviour toward phenomena that the subject has exhibited themselves. His perspective comes across most clearly in a sentence from his major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*: 'To be a consciousness or rather to be an experience is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 111). The distinction of 'being with' as opposed to 'being beside' is a crucial one and echoes Heidegger's concept of 'moving into nearness' (Heidegger, 1966: 89). However, it is apparent that it is based on a very optimistic view of the encounter with The Other.

The tension in Merleau-Ponty between the subjectivity inherent in phenomenology and the objectivity of rational positivism is once again near the surface here. He appears to require his arguments to establish an 'objective truth' equivalent to that the natural sciences produce. This does not appear to be an inherent, logical consequence of his arguments, but the result of an external pressure acting upon them. His attempt to bridge the subjective experience of phenomenology and the objective criteria for truth that science imposes makes him vulnerable to such strains. In this case, the pressure leads him to minimize the disjunction between the subject and The Other, commonly referred to as 'alterity' or 'otherness'.

He goes some way to mitigate this when he describes the failure of communication that necessarily arises from contrasting subjectivities. He says, 'I will never know how you see red,

and you will never know how I see it; but this separation of consciousness is recognized only after failure of communication, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us...' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 17). However, this failure of communication is clearly framed by the assumption of an 'undivided being' between the subject and The Other. This assumption is detectable in the earlier quotation where he describes the other subject that appears to be 'another "myself"' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 17-18). By automatically aligning this other subject with himself he is assuming a common existence between them and it is not therefore surprising that he arrives at a conclusion that minimizes the alterity of The Other. This suggests that Merleau-Ponty starts out with the presupposition that true communication is possible and then directs his arguments to support this, rather than allowing his arguments to proceed organically. Although phenomenology has been reinvented throughout its history, this transgression of Husserl's basic principle of bracketing all aspects of the world that cannot be supported by direct experience seems a dangerous precedent that has the potential to undermine the special power that phenomenology possesses.

If we are to return, again, to the phenomena in order to reclaim the special power of phenomenology, the complete grasp of its target material, we should perhaps turn to another approach to the encounter with The Other. Merleau-Ponty has given us an interesting analysis of what is occurring in 'Repetition from Your Own Point of View', portraying it as the initiation of communication. This perspective offers us an excellent frame of reference for looking at the encounter with The Other in the Repetition exercise, but this discussion can be expanded to a much greater extent by a consideration of Emmanuel Levinas' contribution to the field. Levinas takes up a primarily phenomenological perspective in his studies on temporality, experience, perception, and The Other, but uses this to mount a challenge to the phenomenological tradition.

Levinas vehemently objects to the tendency of Western philosophy to totalise the world or, in other words, to incorporate everything within a single theoretical framework. Most

importantly for this discussion, he believes that this totalising process breaks down at the moment we come ‘face-to-face’ with another subject (Levinas, 1969: 194). Taking up the proposition from the tradition of phenomenology that no two subjects can share the same perspective on the world, and adding to it the permanent possibility of The Other refusing the subject’s perception, he argues that The Other cannot be encompassed by the perception of the subject. He states this plainly when he claims that, ‘The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed’ (*ibid*). Levinas claims that the transcendence of The Other shifts the realm of discussion from ontology to ethics, or from the study of what is, to how we should act. Fundamental to the ethics that Levinas proposes is the inviolability of The Other. Because the defining quality of The Other is their transcendence, any attempt to deny this by wholly encompassing them within our perception of the world would be unethical; to accept the unknowable bounds of The Other is to treat them ethically. Levinas asserts the primacy of ethics to ontology on the basis that, ‘Preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; pre-existing the plane of ontology is the ethical plane’ (Levinas, 1969: 201).

Having established the inescapable alterity of The Other, he returns to a position that echoes Merleau-Ponty’s in its recognition of the encounter with The Other as an opportunity for communication. However, whereas Merleau-Ponty minimised the difference between the subject and The Other, Levinas is coming from precisely the opposite direction. Merleau-Ponty found common ground between the self and The Other in their similar behaviour towards phenomena, but Levinas finds the basis for discourse in the absolute difference of the self and The Other. The difference between the two types of interaction is that Merleau-Ponty is proposing communication to be almost a form of communion with The Other through common relationships to the world, whereas Levinas is proposing discourse as an interaction that connects the subject and The Other through their irrevocable difference. He claims that, ‘better than comprehension, discourse relates with what remains essentially transcendent’

(Levinas, 1969: 195). When we compare Merleau-Ponty's standpoint to this, he can see him claim that, 'there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground', that allows them to be, 'collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 354). To summarise the difference between these two perspectives, we can see Merleau-Ponty collapsing the difference between the self and The Other to achieve a level of objectivity and Levinas defending the transcendence of The Other in order to keep the play of differences alive, a conclusion that is manifested in the contrasting claims the two make. Merleau-Ponty states that the whole of human existence (into which he integrates the encounter with The Other) is subtended by an intentional arc. This means that human existence is built upon the individual's perception, a perception unified within their consciousness that allows them to communicate with others. Levinas, on the other hand, claims that, 'The ethical relationship subtends discourse' (Levinas, 1969: 195). This means that it is the absolute difference between the self and The Other that allows two subjects to establish authentic contact with one another.

Just before we return to the analysis of the Repetition exercise, it is important that we take account of where our various philosophical strands have ended up. Of the two thinkers that we have looked at so far, Merleau-Ponty has let his desire for objective validity lead his arguments into the assumption (beyond the evidence made available through phenomena) that true communication is possible in spite of the impossibility of two subjects sharing the same perspective, and Levinas has jumped rails from ontology to ethics, and despite retaining a phenomenological method in his analysis, has also left behind him the principle that the phenomenologist should bracket all issues about the world that are not given to them directly through phenomena. I make this last claim because, by insisting on the transcendence and absolute difference of The Other, he is assuming the existence of that which he cannot perceive and this is by definition beyond the scope of the phenomenological method. In order to chart the unfolding perceptual processes embedded in the Repetition exercise, we may

need to draw on both of these perspectives at various times, but neither of them should be taken as a final authority on human perception.

To return to ‘Repetition from Your Own Point of View’, Merleau-Ponty might depict this as the initiation of communication. The first speaker takes the element about the second person that their intentional arc leads them to treat as foreground and says this out loud. The second person listens to this statement and responds either positively, thus confirming the first person’s assumption and reinforcing the assumption of an undivided being, or negatively, which challenges this. The first person listens to the statement made by the second person and repeats it, again, from their own point of view, which includes the validity of it from their point of view. This may have changed since they made the original observation, and incorporated the correction made by the second person, or, if they are unconvinced by the correction, they may contradict the assertion made by the second person. If the two students end up agreeing on the statement (for example, “You have an embroidered blouse”, “No, I do not have an embroidered blouse”, “No, you don’t have an embroidered blouse”), Merleau-Ponty might say that this is the success of true communication and the object in question has now achieved inter-subjective being, or objectivity. This analysis appears to accurately describe this phase of the Repetition exercise, but does not seem to delve very deeply into it, and is therefore of limited use in telling us what function the exercise performs towards helping the actors to shape their performance through their engagement with The Other. What we are given, through the tools Merleau-Ponty provides us with, is a simple description of communication, but surely if establishing communication were the only function of the Repetition exercise there would be easier ways to achieve this, and there should be no reason for Meisner to prefer it to the improvisations of the Group Theatre.

What really electrifies the different analyses of ‘Repetition from Your Own Point of View’ is the contribution Levinas’ work can make to the discussion. From his perspective, two subjects face each other, and when the first person makes an observation about the second, they are

describing an aspect of their physical appearance. However, this physical feature is no more than the speaker's own perception and cannot presume to describe anything about the other subject as a subject. Furthermore, within this act there is an implicit acceptance that The Other transcends the speaker's perception of them and any description they may make of this. Because of this transcendence, the first person cannot predict their partner's reaction to their observation and the observation is therefore expressed in an environment of uncertainty. The second person listens to this and repeats the phrase from their own perspective including a judgement of the validity of this observation from their own point of view. However, because of the absolute difference between subjects, it is discourse rather than communication that is established. This is not a communion of meaning, but the interaction of two distinct perspectives, neither of which could ever completely inhabit the point of view of the other. This is analogous to how, according to Merleau-Ponty, the observation springs from the observer's whole intentional arc, but only actually expresses one tiny fragment of it. For Levinas, intersubjective reality is never established because no subject can capture their entire perspective within a single statement, or indeed any number of statements. Just as The Other remains eternally separate from the subject and can never be encompassed by the subject's perception of them, they could never express what defines their alterity to the subject. Instead of communion, discourse allows the two participants to alter their own perceptions of the world under their partner's influence. According to this interpretation, they use the difference of The Other in order to change their own perspective on the world, without ever completely sharing The Other's perspective. This is the most encouraging sign that there may be a way for an actor to use their encounter with another subject in order to craft their own performance. A performance that relies on discourse is one that is not based in the individual's being, but on their actions in the world in the face of The Other. In 'Repetition from Your Own Point of View' we witness one step of discourse, distilled down to its most basic elements: one subject making an observation about the world, and a second subject either confirming this or denying it from their own point of view. Even if the observation is

confirmed from a second point of view, this is discourse rather than communication because the whole perspective is not shared, only one facet of it.

Almost immediately after introducing ‘Repetition from Your Own Point of View’, and once his students appear to grasp it sufficiently, Meisner takes the exercise to the next phase, ‘Impulsive Changes’. Once again, he does this through demonstration rather than description.

He says to a student:

“*You’re staring at me.*”  
“*I’m staring at you.*”  
“*You’re staring at me.*”  
“*I’m staring at you.*”  
“*You admit it?*”  
“*I admit it.*”  
“*You admit it.*”  
“*I admit it.*”  
“*I don’t like it.*”  
“*You don’t like it.*”  
“*You don’t care?*”  
“*I don’t care.*”  
“*You don’t care?*”  
“*I don’t care!*”

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 23)

In this example, Meisner apparently allows himself to freely alter the words he speaks according to what his impulses dictate. In the general terms of the phenomenological discussion we have engaged in so far, this means that Meisner is allowing himself to change his words when something new replaces the original observation at the foreground of his perception. When Meisner explains this to the class, he says, ‘The instinct changes the dialogue. Then it continues and you wait until the instinct changes it again’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 28-9). From Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, the actors are now being asked to give voice to what their intentional arc brings to the foreground of their perception. It would be wrong to say that they are being asked to pay attention to the foreground of their intentional arc, because this would turn the direction of their observation in on themselves and thus commit the crime Meisner accused Strasberg of when he told him, ‘You introvert the already introverted’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 59). Instead, their attention needs to be

focused on their partner in order to repeat the words that they say, but when their intentional arc dictates that something about their partner is more important than the words they are saying, they should make an observation about that feature. The delicacy of this balance might explain why Meisner chooses to lead his students through the exercises in the way that he does rather than asking them to follow definite instructions. This level of Repetition shows how the students are being asked to experience the world in a certain way and to cultivate a more sensitive relationship to their engagement with it, and not to distance themselves from it by trying to ‘become’ something they are not.

From Levinas' point of view, the incorporation of impulsive changes in the Repetition exercise allows discourse to develop. When the actor's partner shows an as yet hidden side of themselves, this is evidence of The Other's power of refusal. Refusal in this sense means that The Other cannot be encompassed by the perception of the subject, even if they so desired to be. Thus the emergence of a new feature in the appearance of The Other reinforces their alterity. When such a feature comes to the foreground of the observer's perception, they do not say it in order to define The Other, but to acknowledge the change in their own perception of the world and thereby continue to develop the discourse being held between the two. According to Levinas, by acknowledging the change in the appearance of The Other, they are in fact endorsing the transcendence of The Other. By expressing the new foreground of their perception, they are fundamentally changing their relationship with the world and in doing so they are in turn showing a previously hidden or refused aspect of themselves to their partner. The presentation of this new aspect may then lead to the same process of impulsive change in their partner, and thus fuel the continuance of the exercise.

Once the ‘Repetition from Your Own Point of View’ has been established, and impulsive shifts to the words spoken have been incorporated into it, Meisner introduces his students to the ‘Three Moment Exercise’. This exercise is very much like the first three statements of the repetition exercise as it has so far been established, but with one further instruction included –

that the first observation should be a provocative one. This might seem to introduce an element of contemplation and abstract thought into the exercise, but it is important to note that this contrived element is only in preparation for the first step of the exercise, and once the first observation has been made the participants proceed with the exercise as they did before – listening to the words spoken to them and repeating them to their partner until they feel the impulse to change the words.

To understand the effect that this has on the perception of the participants, it is important to consider this new instruction alongside the principle of ‘The Pinch and the Ouch’ that Meisner introduces to the class. This is made up of two simple instructions, “‘*Don’t do anything unless something happens to make you do it.*’ That’s one of them. The second is: ‘*What you do doesn’t depend on you; it depends on the other fellow*’” (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 34, emphasis in original). This principle places the impetus for action on to the other person, and puts each actor into a reactive state. Because of this, an initial spark of action is required in order to provide the stimulus for the reaction. As we have seen in the above phenomenological descriptions of the Repetition exercise, once the exercise is in motion the reactions themselves provide enough fuel, from the perspective of the other participant, for the exercise to continue. The Three Moment Exercise is therefore a way to remove the stimulus from the operation of the exercise so that once it begins the students do not have to think, but can instead rely on the impulses that have been set in motion by the initial observation and continue because of the particular relationship between the self and The Other that we have seen operating. From Levinas’ point of view, the provocative observation emphasises the alterity of the two participants. The further removed that the observation is from the listener’s perspective, the more distant the two participants become in their discourse, and therefore the more productive that discourse will be. This does bring up an interesting issue with Levinas’ standpoint however, as if the two subjects are already coming from perspectives of *absolute* difference, the question might be raised how this absolute difference can be increased – how is it possible to be more than infinitely separate? Here we

come to the difficult issue of applying Levinas' theories in practice. However, we might safely say that although The Other cannot be encompassed by the subject's view of the world, their typical behaviour might suggest a pattern of what might provoke a reaction from them. This does not dismiss the possibility of refusal, of The Other proving their transcendence by breaking this theoretical pattern, and so does not invalidate Levinas' stance as a whole.

From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the provocative observation acts as a wilful obstruction to communication. By attempting to elicit a reaction from their partner rather than sincerely articulating their reality, they are forgoing the opportunity Merleau-Ponty identified to engage in true communication in order to establish an intersubjective truth. This highlights the idealistic nature of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the encounter with The Other. At the same time it illustrates that there is more to the function of the Repetition exercise than merely the facilitation of communication.

We can now see that the observation that began the 'Mechanical Repetition', and that has now evolved into the provocative statement, provides the subject of the improvisation. Although repetition can justifiably be described as improvisation that focuses on the dynamic of improvisation rather than a predetermined content, the Three Moment Exercise has drawn out the initiation of the exercise from its continued operation. This enables the exercise to function as pure Repetition, while also allowing space for an outside element to initiate it. The dynamic of the exercise now centres exclusively on the interaction of two subjects through their outward behaviour.

As we shall see in the following chapter, the initiation that the provocative statement provides will subsequently be supplied by 'Independent Activities,' the next step in the process of orientation that Meisner's training initiates in the actor. In scene work, this role will eventually be provided by the script. What is important to notice at this point is that the script, activity, or provocative statement are not an integral part of the actions of the actor in performing the role or exercise. It might sound absurd to say that the performance of a script has nothing to

do with the script, but this is clarified when we see that the initiation, in whichever form it comes, is laid upon a particular way that the actor relates to the world. I will explore Meisner's ambivalent attitude to the text of scripts in Chapters Four and Five in relation to modern, realist theatre and postmodern performance respectively. In the case of the Repetition exercise, the orientation that the actor is engaging in prioritises the relationship with The Other and the impulses of the subject. The Repetition exercise eventually yields smoothly to 'Independent Activities' and 'The Knock at the Door', 'Emotional Preparation', and to scene work, but I will now analyse what I am treating as the final stage of the Repetition exercise itself, 'Meaningful Moment to Meaningful Moment'.

As Meisner takes his students through this final stage of Repetition before more layers are added to the Technique, the principle of 'The Pinch and the Ouch' is constantly reiterated. Some of the students may find this repetitive execution of a repetitive exercise tiresome, but Meisner responds by saying, 'Look, I'll tell you why the repetition exercise, in essence, is not boring: it plays on the source of all organic creativity, which is the inner impulses. I wish I could make that clear! ... the practitioner is somebody who is learning to funnel his [sic] instincts, not give performances' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 37). Meisner's description of Repetition as training the students to funnel their instincts approaches our interpretation of it as a process of perceptual orientation. What is interesting about Meisner's statement here is his claim that the 'inner impulses' are 'the source of all organic creativity.' This is startling because 'The Pinch and the Ouch' dictates that everything the students do should be caused by their partner, rather than their inner impulses. This leads us to the logical conclusion that Repetition allows the students to access their inner impulses, and therefore their organic creativity, through their relationship with The Other.

Once the exercise has been initiated, the students are repeatedly instructed to 'read the behavior' of their partner. Meisner makes it clear that any change in the dialogue must be caused by the behaviour of the other person, and traces the link between the behaviour of the

other person and the internal impulses of the actor. He says, ‘There comes a point when one of you has to pick up what the repetition is doing to you. I don’t care what it is. ... In other words, your instinct picks up the change in his behavior and the dialogue changes too’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 29-30). It is important to note how Meisner is downplaying the agency of the actor in this statement. He tells them that their instinct picks up the change in their partner’s behaviour and that the dialogue changes, as if by itself. By explaining it this way, Meisner is once again limiting the role of objective reasoning; the students are told to let the dialogue change because of their instinct, not to judge when the behaviour of The Other tells them that the dialogue should change. This drives home the need to approach Meisner’s Technique phenomenologically as it is becoming increasingly apparent that it is an acting methodology based in the way the students relate to the world and their acting partner, and not a set of objective instructions for how this should be done; Meisner is directing the actors’ focus on to the behaviour of their partner and away from their impulses so that those impulses may be manifested through their behaviour in a less mediated fashion. This indicates that Meisner believes the impulses at the root of good acting need to be harnessed, not through conscious attention, but through an attentive relationship to The Other. It is on the basis of this relationship that a performance can be created according to the Meisner Technique.

At this point Merleau-Ponty can offer an insightful analysis of how ‘Meaningful Moment to Meaningful Moment’ Repetition is functioning. Merleau-Ponty saw The Other emerge as a subject to the perceiver through their exhibition of behaviour that they have typically engaged in themselves. This emergence creates the possibility for true communication which might lead to phenomena in the world achieving intersubjective being. Merleau-Ponty saw that this led to a relationship with The Other that was ‘being with’ rather than ‘being beside’ (as the relationship between the subject and objects is classified as). If, in the Repetition exercise, the encounter with The Other leads to the emergence of new impulses that would not have been there without that encounter, then ‘being with’ one another alters the subjects’ perspectives. This means that in the very act of communication, the subject is changed and the perspective

from which they began the exchange is abandoned for a new perspective, shaped by the communication itself. This opens a way for Merleau-Ponty's perspective to be more illuminating about the encounter with The Other than we have so far seen. If the subject's perspective is shifted through this encounter, true communication is put beyond reach, as even if one subject could fully express their perspective, through the act of expression that perspective has shifted and is therefore no longer an accurate representation of that subject's reality. This shows that the communication that Repetition initiates is a perpetual and futile attempt to catch up to the reality of The Other. It is through the students' wholehearted commitment to this pursuit through their close attention to The Other's behaviour that they open themselves to continual change which could be seen as a constant reformulation of their intentional arc. This ceaseless evolution of 'the self' could be seen as the framework that Meisner is attempting to establish as the basis for acting.

However, just as we saw in the Observation chapter that every perception must consist of the perceived object and the perceiving subject, this ceaseless evolution of the self must occur in response to something in the world. The Repetition exercise fixes this stimulus as the behaviour of The Other. As we shall see in the Independent Activities chapter and the discussion of the Spoon River exercise in Chapter Four, there are other potential sources of stimulation, but I believe Meisner begins by focusing on the behaviour of The Other because the encounter with The Other is the most fertile source of provocation. This potentially inexhaustible exercise shows that a symbiotic relationship can be created between two actors who, though never sharing the same perspective, cause the reshaping of The Other through their impulsive reaction to The Other's reshaping. Seen in this light it becomes apparent that the provocative statement is needed to provide the activation energy, or trigger, to set this self-sustaining reaction in progress.

Levinas has given us an alternative grasp on every stage of Repetition, and the 'Meaningful Moment to Meaningful Moment' phase of the exercise is no exception. On this view the

continuance of the exercise is fuelled by the infinite alterity of the two subjects. Because The Other cannot be totalised within the perception of the subject, their behaviour reveals to the subject a constantly unfolding entity. Every new aspect of their behaviour shows an as yet unseen side of their subjectivity. Even if The Other were to attempt to conceal their reactions from the subject, this refusal is in itself a new aspect of their behaviour. By focusing on each other's behaviour and allowing the dialogue to change according to their impulses, the students bring the alterity of The Other to the foreground of their perception and directly shape their own behaviour and perspective according to it. They do not, and cannot, capture the whole of the other person within their perception, but by fixing their attention on their absolute otherness, they are forcing themselves into constant contact with that which escapes them. This destabilises their identity and removes the potential for them to *be* anything in the face of The Other. This is a direct demonstration of each student using the encounter with The Other in order to shape their perception of the world in such a way as to deny themselves stable being and to thrust themselves into the flow of action. Eventually, as we shall see in Chapter Four, this surrender of being in favour of action paradoxically allows the actor to be an object in the perception of the audience.

The phenomenological perspectives that we have applied to Meisner's Repetition exercise show us a wide range of possible interpretations of the processes at work within the exercise. I am not proposing that any one of these provides the ultimate analysis of the exercise and has privileged access to a truth that underpins it. Rather, this spectrum of explanations shows us some of the many ways the students may be relating to themselves, the world around them, and The Other. What emerges from this collection of potential relationships is a very clear affirmation that the Meisner Technique is constructing a foundation of behaviour that will ultimately underpin the actors' performances and this foundation of behaviour is based on their holistic perception of the world.

# Independent Activities

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In this chapter I will conduct phenomenological analyses of Meisner's Independent Activity exercise in order to demonstrate the Meisner actor's relationship with action. In doing so, I will show how the Meisner Technique enables actors to harness their 'being-in-the-world' to meet the demands of modern, realist theatre. Such an approach, which relies on phenomenologically-aligned imperatives, means that the Meisner Technique is not confined to this mode of performance, but has significant resonances with some examples of postmodern performance. Seen in this light the Meisner Technique can be taken as an example of continuity between these two paradigms of theatre/performance.

The Independent Activity exercise requires one actor to engage in an activity in front of the class. Once they have entered 'fully' into this task, a second actor will knock at the door, be admitted to the studio, and engage the first actor in Repetition (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39). When Meisner introduces the Independent Activity exercise, he adds the criteria that the activity must be difficult and that the actor must have a 'reason why' they need to perform it (*ibid*). From Meisner's coaching of the exercise, it is apparent that there are two further conditions for the Independent Activity: that the 'reason why' must contain an element of urgency, and the actor must have some skill or ability to perform the task they assign themselves (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 49 & 54). Also, because it determines the relationship between the actor and their actions, The Independent Activity exercise bears directly on Meisner's assertion that, 'The foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 16). With the phenomenological tools of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, I will now examine this exercise from the perspective of its participants and assess how these four criteria determine its process. Once I have laid this picture out, I will show how the second part of the exercise, that begins with the second actor's knock at the door, operates according to the dynamic of Repetition I investigated in the previous chapter.

This third phase of my phenomenological analysis will complete the picture I am constructing of the relationship between the actor and their environment, other people, and actions that the Meisner Technique instigates. This will allow me to assess the ways this dynamic enables the actor to perform modern, realist theatre in Chapter Four and the ways it exceeds this paradigm of theatre by resonating with particular strands of the postmodern field in Chapter Five and certain examples of postmodern performance in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight. Taken together these chapters illustrate specific continuities between the paradigms of modern, realist theatre and postmodern performance.

## Section One: A Skill or Ability – Invoking the Familiar

As I have said, it is clear from Meisner's coaching of the Independent Activity Exercise that one of the rules that govern it is that the student must have a skill or ability to carry out the task they set themselves. This is most clearly illustrated by Meisner's feedback to Bruce who has elected to play a harmonica for his activity. Because he has no personal skill or ability to play this instrument, Bruce's activity becomes, 'mere unskilled noodling' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 52). It is important to note that the level of skill or ability Meisner prescribes for the task does not demand virtuosity; if the student is a master of the activity they have chosen, they may have to work harder to find the requisite difficulty within it. However, it is clear that they must have a sufficient grasp of the basic activity to comprehensively engage with it. Meisner also criticises Bruce's activity on the basis that it is not difficult and that he has no compelling reason for doing it. He then advises him to pick a song that suits the instrument, is difficult to play, and that he must learn for a specific reason. He tells Bruce that, 'If you decide *why*, you are exercising your imagination. If it is difficult, it will intensify your concentration' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 54). Two assumptions that underlie this feedback may not be made explicit because they do not further the process of pragmatic teaching Meisner is engaged in. The first of these is that the student must understand their instrument well enough to know which piece might suit it. The second is that the student must have enough familiarity with the

craft to have the ‘world’ of that craft accessible to them without having exhausted its possibilities. This latter assumption is made apparent by Meisner telling Bruce that the piece should be, ‘one you know but have never played’ (*ibid*). This is a clear example of the balance between ability and difficulty that Meisner is asking the student to strike with their activity. The level of ability that is required necessarily means that the student is bringing a familiarity, though not an expertise, from their everyday life into the performance space.

By drawing the material for the Independent Activities from their own abilities, and therefore engaging in familiar actions, Meisner’s students are bringing their own ‘world’ on to stage. A key tenet of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is his argument that the personal world of the individual is shaped by their physical relationship to it. For example, he writes, ‘My flat is, for me, not a set of closely associated images. It remains a familiar domain round about me only as long as I still have “in my hands” or “in my legs” the main distances and directions involved, and as long as from my body intentional threads run out towards it’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 150). This assertion indicates that the necessary elements for him to establish a ‘familiar domain’ are to have the navigation of it ‘in [his] hands/legs’ and to have ‘intentional threads’ running from his body out towards it. We can extrapolate from this that if the actor has both a physical grasp of the space and intentional connections with it they will experience it as a ‘familiar domain’. I will now deal with the physical aspect of this relationship and return to the intentional dimension in the following sections. What we can assert at this stage is that the ‘reality of doing’ that Meisner refers to brings a ‘personal world’ or ‘familiar domain’ on to stage by virtue of the fact that the Independent Activity exercise relies upon skills or abilities that the acting students have in their everyday lives. This means that the ‘reality of doing’ brings with it the distances and orientations that the student has in their body from their everyday lives.

This simple act of drawing personal acts on to stage in the service of representational theatre illustrates just how fine the distinction between realistic theatre and some varieties of

postmodern performance can be. The dynamic at work within the Independent Activity exercise separates the actor's engagement with an action from the audience's perception of that action and any representational function it may be fulfilling in that perception. This demonstrates that the Meisner Technique creates continuity between two paradigms of theatre/performance – one that represents a fiction and the other that encourages the interpretation of the performer's actions in alternative ways – by separating the action of the performer from the perception of the audience.

According to Michael Kirby, the quality that most definitively classifies a performance as either part of the old theatre or the 'New Theatre' is whether or not it is located within matrices of character or situation (Kirby, 1965: 32). One of Kirby's insights in his model of 'The New Theatre' is that the elements of performance, including the work of performers, are combined in an 'alogical' manner. Kirby explains that 'alogic' is distinct from both the logic of dramatic theatre and the illogic of Absurd Theatre in that in The New Theatre, 'The elements remained intellectually discrete. Each was a separate compartment' (Kirby, 1965: 28). It is important to note the essentially 'alogical' relationship in Meisner's Independent Activity exercise between the performer's activity and any fictional 'matrices' that activity may be working within. Although the fictional dimension has not yet been introduced, at this stage of Meisner's programme the Independent Activity is essentially anchored in a personal familiarity of the actor. This requirement is an inherent quality of the exercise and cannot later be removed when it may be required to represent a fiction to an audience. This cuts right at the joint of Kirby's distinction between the old theatre and the new because, if the elements of a performance are combined in an 'alogical' manner but can still be used to represent fiction in modern, realist theatre, then the paradigms Kirby identifies as 'the old theatre' and 'The New' are paradigms of *reception*, and do not prevent theatre being *produced* from a continuous tradition that does not distinguish between these two forms of theatre/performance in every facet of its inherent structures.

Before looking into the intentional aspects of Independent Activities in the ‘Reason Why’ section below, there is one further distinction between types of physical involvement in the world that will further this investigation. Merleau-Ponty says that people are able to utilise their familiarity with habitual actions to enable themselves to better understand their environment. He says that it is, ‘by giving up part of his spontaneity, by becoming involved in the world through stable organs and pre-established circuits that man [sic] can acquire the mental and practical space which will theoretically free him from his environment and allow him to *see* it’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 :100-1, emphasis in original). If we apply this to the Independent Activities exercise, what is immediately striking is the suggestion that the familiarity of the activity might have the effect of limiting spontaneity, something that might be considered harmful to naturalistic performances in general, and Meisner performances in particular. Meisner says that his technique is, ‘emotional and impulsive, and *gradually* when the actors I train improvise, what they say – like what the composer writes – comes not from the head but truthfully from the impulses’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 37, emphasis in original). The impulsiveness that Meisner speaks of might be taken to mean a type of ideal spontaneity, but actually carries with it a number of psychophysical connotations and depends upon the particular perspective of the individual.

When Merleau-Ponty talks about establishing an ‘habitual body’, he is making the point that spontaneity is sacrificed and ‘stable organs’ and ‘pre-established circuits’ are utilised in order for the individual to understand their situation objectively. This desire to establish an objective perspective on the world is tied to Merleau-Ponty’s tendency to reconcile his phenomenology with natural science. This reconciliation sacrifices his phenomenology’s complete grasp of its target material – one of the original strengths of Husserl’s project. Instead of using the quality of familiarity to come closer to an objective perspective on the world, I would like to show how it enables to the actor to put certain aspects of their experience to one side (or bracket them) in order to engage more completely with other parts of their environment. This is a close parallel to the phenomenological reduction where issues

of truth and causation are bracketed in order to investigate the realm of experience (Husserl, 1962: §50). In the Independent Activity exercise we see the actor simplifying their engagement with a task through familiarity so that they are not confronted with the sensory-motor complexity of performing an activity for the first time. Not having to think objectively about the task means that the actor is able to put elements of technical knowledge to one side and spend more of their attention on the human significance it holds for them. I will expand further upon this below in section two, 'A Reason Why'.

Merleau-Ponty's model of the 'habitual body' fits well with Heidegger's picture of 'absorbed coping' where objects that someone uses to perform an action they are competent with become 'transparent' and disappear from the forefront of that person's immediate consciousness (Heidegger, 1962: 164). We will take the time to examine this phenomenon that Heidegger proposes more closely in the following section in conjunction with his model of chains of significance and Meisner's requirement that the actor have a 'reason why' they perform their Independent Activity. However, it is important that we note here that these issues are firmly rooted in the necessity of the actor having a skill or ability to perform the task they have chosen. Without the skill or ability to perform the activity the student sets themselves, they would not have access to the 'pre-established circuits' necessary to create a 'familiar domain' on stage. This means that far from being a coincidental connection, the engaged action anchored in the personal world of the performer that we have just outlined is a necessary condition for the rest of the dynamic to operate effectively.

## Section Two: A Reason Why

That the actor must have a 'reason why' they perform their activity is one of the two requirements Meisner explicitly claims are necessary for the effective execution of the Independent Activity. In a rare moment of frankness he tells his students, 'You *must* have a reason why you want to do it, because that's the source of your concentration and eventually of your emotion, which comes by itself' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39). To make it perfectly

clear what Meisner is impressing upon his students, we might say that he is suggesting that the ‘reason why’ an actor does an activity allows them to concentrate, and it is this concentration that will eventually awaken their emotions. Before we explore the consequences of the exercise, however, we must look at another demand that Meisner makes of the students practising it. He tells them that the ‘reason why’ must have, ‘a consuming reality’ for them (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 40). By evoking the concept of ‘reality’ in the context of action, Meisner is confirming our earlier assertion that the Independent Activity exercise has a direct relationship to ‘the reality of doing’.

By insisting the actors have a ‘reason why’ they perform their activity Meisner ensures that they bring their ‘world’ (in a Heideggarian sense) on to stage with them. If they did not have such a reason, they might look at the activity objectively and see themselves as simply playing a harmonica, for instance. By asking them to have a reason for performing the activity, however, Meisner is insuring that they justify the activity with a motivation from their own everyday world. The first thing to note about this is that by insisting that it is particularly them and not just anyone performing the activity, Meisner is implicating the actor’s perspective. This reinforces what we discovered in Chapter One that from the earliest observation exercises Meisner emphasises the perspective of the actor and their particular stance on the world, be that primarily a spatial perspective or one of human significance. Furthermore, we discovered in our discussion of Meisner’s observation exercises that the physical aspects of the world that make up the actor’s perception of their immediate, concrete environment are tied to elements of human significance that are a part of their instinctive and emotional grasp of the world through the unity of perception and their particular intentional arc. Drawing the Independent Activity from the everyday world of the actor ties neatly into the requirement that they must have a skill or ability for the task, but takes it a step further by adding a human element to what may have otherwise been seen as a purely physical relationship. The familiarity of the physical skill or ability is therefore what allows the performer to bring their human world on to stage and it is the ‘reason why’ that enables them to immerse themselves in, or be consumed

by, an aspect of that world. This fulfils the second part of Merleau-Ponty's requirements for the creation of a familiar domain – that intentional threads connect the individual to their environment. This is where we see the important distinction between someone seeing themselves as objectively 'playing a harmonica' and thinking, 'I will play that harmonica in order to...' This also solidifies the way that Meisner's Technique is operating in parallel to Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the unity of perception and the intentional arc.

Martin Heidegger comprehensively explores the meaning and value that human beings find in the world in *Being and Time*. Here he provides an existential description of 'being-in-the-world' in which he shows that we relate to the inanimate entities we encounter as primarily 'present-at-hand' [*vorhanden*] (objects that are there for us but serve no purpose) (Heidegger, 1962: 68) or 'ready-to-hand' [*zuhanden*] (entities that enable us to act in the world) (Heidegger, 1962: 98). The objects that Meisner's students select for their Independent Activities must necessarily be 'ready-to-hand' by virtue of the fact that they are used to act in the world.

Within Heidegger's holistic conception of 'worldhood', 'ready-to-hand' entities fit into a 'referential totality' in two different ways. Firstly, 'ready-to-hand' entities (or equipment) belong to a 'referential totality' of all 'ready-to-hand' entities or as Heidegger puts it, 'there is no such thing as *an* equipment. To the Being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is' (Heidegger, 1962: 97). To demonstrate this with one of Heidegger's examples, a hammer is employed 'in-order-to' hammer nails, and a nail could be said to be employed 'in-order-to' fasten two planks of wood together (Heidegger, 1962: 109). In fact hammers could not exist as hammers without the existence of nails and nails could not exist as nails without the existence of hammers – their existence as 'ready-to-hand' is interdependent.

The second 'holism' that equipment participates in is as part of Dasein's 'being-in-the-world'. Here every 'ready-to-hand' entity fits into a converging flow of purpose that ultimately

terminates in a ‘for-the-sake-of’ that has a bearing on Dasein’s being (Heidegger, 1962: 116-117). To return to Heidegger’s hammer example, the hammer is a ‘with-which’ you might hammer nails into wood, ‘in-order-to’ fix two planks of wood together. This action might in turn relate to the building of a house as a ‘towards-which’ (the project towards which the action is directed). The building of a house might be said to have a pragmatic motivation, or an ontic ‘towards-which’ such as providing shelter (*ibid*). This is not the final step for Heidegger, however, because as ‘a being whose being is an issue for it’, every chain of ‘ready-to-hand’s must terminate in a primary ‘towards-which’ that is called a ‘for-the-sake-of’ through which Dasein takes a stand on its being (*ibid*). In this example, such a ‘for-the-sake-of’ might be to *be* a shelterer, or to *be* a carpenter (Dreyfus, 2007: n.p.).

The ‘reason why’ that Meisner requires the students have fits into this chain of significances as an ontic ‘towards-which’. For example, one of Meisner’s students, Joseph, decides to draw a cartoon for his nephew who is sick in hospital, explaining why he should not be afraid (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 41). In this case, Joseph’s ‘towards-which’ is to draw a cartoon for his nephew. What is left unsaid by Meisner, from Heidegger’s perspective, is that this ontic ‘towards-which’ is itself ‘for-the-sake-of’ the student taking a stand on their being. In this example this ontological ‘for-the-sake-of’ might be for Joseph to *be* a good uncle. By inventing the activity for the exercise, the student is introducing some abstract or fictional elements into their relationship with the world, for example, although Joseph may indeed have a nephew, he may not be ill. This is not in itself a problem for Heidegger as imaginary entities can have equal weight as ‘real’ ones within the existential world that he is describing (Heidegger, 1962: 182-88). Furthermore, if we apply Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of the unity of perception and the intentional arc we can see how these abstract elements form part of the actor’s holistic perception of the world without any strict boundaries between what is ‘true’ and ‘untrue’ being able to endure. For the actor, according to this interpretation of their experience, it matters less what is objectively ‘true’ (possible and necessary) than what is ‘real’ for them.

What we must not allow to slip by unnoticed is that while the introduction of fiction makes no significant difference in terms of Heidegger's 'chains of significance', it makes it necessary for us to distinguish the introduction of fiction into the experience of the performer from the representation of fiction to an audience. Even when the actor includes an element of fiction in their action, it is still an engaged action anchored in their perspective on the world and not a pretended or represented action. If there are any fictional elements involved for the actor, it is necessary for them to incorporate them into their familiar domain through the orientation their skill endows their body with and the intentional threads that the 'reason why' establishes between them and their world. This is similar to our argument in the Observation chapter that the Meisner actor is seeking to mirror the action of Merleau-Ponty's Schneider in that they need to make any abstract actions they are required to perform as concrete as possible.

This phenomenological inquiry is beginning to lead us towards the fundamental elements of Meisner's approach to theatre. We are starting to see two distinct perspectives emerge within the theatre event – that of the audience and the performer. This investigation does not set out to discuss the audience's grasp of the fiction or any notion of the actors' true selves. From the phenomenological standpoint I have adopted in this work, both the audience's interpretation of a fictional narrative and the actor's self are created from the engaged action that both centre around. In the Meisner Technique this is expressed by his overarching principle, 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing.' This demonstrates how inappropriate it would be to permanently tie such concepts as representation to the Meisner Technique. In this approach actors are those who act (in the sense of performing 'real' actions) in the world, not those who pretend to be someone they are not.

Although the inclusion of fictional elements into the actor's world does not substantially affect this investigation, what does have a bearing on our discussion is that this partially invented ontological 'for-the-sake-of' (Joseph's desire to *be* a good uncle for example) obscures from us the fact that there are, in fact, more steps to this 'equipmental' chain of meaning that are

hidden by the fictionalised ontological ‘for-the-sake-of’ just as a false bottom in a suitcase might hide the compartment below it. If we excavate below the fictionalised ‘for-the-sake-of’, we can see that there is probably a further ontic ‘towards-which’ (to perform the Independent Activity exercise) that is in turn based upon a primary ontological ‘for-the-sake-of’ (to be an actor) that the students probably have by virtue of their participation in the exercise in the context of Meisner’s class. It is, however, important to note that these ‘hidden’ significances are not consciously employed by the Independent Activity exercise and, as we will see in the third and fourth sections, are obscured by the difficulty and urgency of the exercise.

To summarise our conclusions so far, we have established that a certain skill or ability allows the actor to bring their ‘world’ on to stage and the ‘reason why’ allows them to be ‘consumed’ by it. Crucially we have noted that the combination of these features ensures that the actor is engaging in a real action that derives its meaning from its context within the actor’s world. Therefore, when Meisner claims that, ‘the foundation of acting is the reality of doing’, he is saying that the engaged, worldly action is at the heart of the theatrical dynamic because it is here, rather than in the fiction interpreted by the audience or the essential self of the actor, that the perspectives of the audience and actor converge.

### Section Three: Difficulty

The second of the two explicit requirements that Meisner places on the participants of the Independent Activity exercise is that it should be difficult. When he sets Vince the first Independent Activity of looking for K.Z. Smith’s phone number in the Manhattan phone directory he says that, ‘It is *difficult* to do. It takes all of your concentration, and out of that some emotion will come’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39). This is the second time he has mentioned the role concentration plays in inciting the actor’s emotion, but the ‘reason why’ is originally named as the source of the actor’s concentration and consequently of their emotion (*ibid*). To now say that the concentration comes from the difficulty shows how these two qualities of the Independent Activity are interrelated. Where the ‘reason why’ provided a

human significance to the concentration (the motivation to concentrate) the difficulty provides the physical or practical aspect of concentration (the necessity to concentrate). The connection between concentration and the incitement of emotion appeals to common sense in that it could be said that the more somebody is immersed in an activity, the less self-conscious they can be and therefore the more impulsively they can behave. However, the strength of phenomenology is that it can focus on areas of human experience that are normally dismissed as common sense and fix a ‘particularising attention’ on them (Garner, 1994: 4-5).

The difficulty that Meisner prescribes for the Independent Activity exercise would fall under Heidegger’s classification of ‘obstinacy’. When something disturbs the transparent coping with which a person engages in a familiar activity and the intended action fails, Heidegger says that the ‘ready-to-hand’ objects take on a quality of ‘obstinacy’ and become ‘unready-to-hand’ (Heidegger, 1962: 410). This classification is distinct from ‘present-at-hand’ in that they have the potential to be ‘ready-to-hand’ if their ‘obstinacy’ is overcome. It is interesting that, given the lengths to which Meisner has gone to make his students bring the familiar on to stage with them and engage in transparent coping, he would then disrupt this by introducing obstinacy into the process. The fact that he does this implies that he wants the actor to undergo a two-stage process. In the first stage, the actor should establish a familiar domain on stage by practicing a skill or ability from their own lives which has a human as well as a physical dimension to it. The second stage is the disruption of the transparent coping the actor is normally able to engage in that forces them to consciously focus on the mechanics of their actions.

The clue to the purpose of this disruption lies in the surprising conclusion we came to earlier, that the Independent Activity exercise appears to sacrifice some of the actors’ spontaneity by asking them to engage in action through what Merleau-Ponty describes as ‘pre-established circuits’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 100-1). Here then, would seem to be the antidote to this loss

of impulsiveness; it might be said that the reason the actor is asked to engage in an activity they have an ability to perform is to create a familiar domain on stage with objects that are not ‘present-at-hand’. If there is no possibility of the actor entering the state of transparent coping, they cannot enter into the action as ‘fully’ as if there were a chance of this occurring. Therefore when the actor performs the activity and they have their ‘ready-to-hand’ objects made ‘unready-to-hand’ through obstinacy, their skill means that they still have the chance of succeeding in their action and achieving their human ‘reason why’. This possibility means that they are able to completely commit to the action, narrowing their conscious focus to the realms of the activity. In doing so they withdraw from any ‘pre-established circuits’ in relation to the rest of their environment and therefore reclaim a degree of spontaneity in their relationship to it. This will become important for our examination of the second part of the Independent Activity exercise when the second actor knocks at the door and engages the first in Repetition.

The mechanics of these processes force the actor to concentrate. Many theorists of acting/performance from Stanislavsky to Phillip Zarrilli have explored the causes and effects of concentration in their writing. Stanislavsky discusses this in relation to ‘spheres of concentration’ from public solitude through to one that includes the entire theatre in the actor’s awareness (Stanislavsky, 1937: 75-77). Michael Chekhov develops Stanislavsky’s discussion of this quality through a comprehensive programme of exercises designed to shape the deployment of concentration and energy (Chekhov, 1953: 26-27). Phillip Zarrilli draws connections between the Western quality of concentration in theatrical practices and the intentional circulation and exploitation of energy in certain Eastern medical and martial arts (Zarrilli, 2002a: 181-2).

The interesting difference between these three practitioners and Sanford Meisner is that in the Meisner Technique the concentration is not directed to the thing that is intended to be shown to the audience, but away from it in order to allow it to be manifested more easily. In

Stanislavsky concentration is used to direct the audience's gaze to particular regions in the theatre, in Michael Chekov it is intended to develop relationships between the actor and objects, people or spaces around them, and in Zarrilli it is concerned with fashioning a particular relationship between the performer and their task. Although the Meisner Technique is also shaping the relationship between actors and their activities, and a large part of this relationship is determined by concentration, it actually allows the actor to establish a more spontaneous relationship with their environment outside and beyond this sphere of concentration; Meisner's Independent Activity exercise allows the behaviour between two actors to emerge spontaneously by directing the actors' attention away from it. I will follow this line of inquiry further in section five through my discussion of the second part of the Independent Activity exercise that follows the 'Knock at the Door'.

This is not the end of the chain of consequences introduced by the requirement of difficulty, however. The actor's horizon of conscious attention contracts, not only spatially, but also in terms of their chain of significances. Their ultimate for-the-sake-of (to be an actor) is left beyond this sphere of attention, concealing those significances that extend beyond the realms of the performance. This process effectively seals off the 'hidden compartment' of ultimate 'for-the-sake-of's that we discussed existing beneath those significances directly used in the exercise.

In summary, we can see the required difficulty disrupting the actor's performance of their selected activity. In doing this it sharpens the actor's conscious attention on the activity and therefore allows their relationship with the other performer to unfold more spontaneously. Furthermore, their horizon of attention is narrowed to the particular 'towards-which' they have selected for their activity, and any thoughts beyond this are closed off from their immediate attention.

## Section Four: Urgency

Just as Meisner's explicit criterion of difficulty contains within it the unstated condition that the actor must have a skill or ability to perform the activity, the other explicitly stated guideline, that the actor must have a 'reason why' they perform the activity has the contributing quality of urgency. This requirement comes through in Meisner's teaching when he tells Joseph that he must draw his cartoon, 'as if his life depends on it', and by him frequently reminding the actors not to be distracted from their activity by the Repetition (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 41). Martin Barter, who teaches at The Sanford Meisner Centre in Los Angeles goes a step further and makes 'urgency' one of the central features of the exercise that the student should be aware of when they are constructing their activity (Barter in Meisner, 2006: 46:10). I will return to this modification of Meisner's Technique later in this section to explain the difference it makes to the dynamic of the exercise.

Urgency has a similar effect on the activity as difficulty, in that it requires the actor to focus more tightly on completing the activity. This means that the actor is unable to consider the motivations that lie outside the immediate parameters of the exercise. Once again this works to seal off the 'hidden compartment' that lies beneath the apparent chain of significances governing the exercise. Similarly to the difficulty, this forces the actor to withdraw from any 'pre-established circuits' they have in relation to the rest of the space and their fellow actor, meaning that their behaviour towards these is forced to become less considered and more spontaneous.

I believe that Meisner doesn't make the requirement of urgency explicit for his students as Martin Barter does because this might encourage them to become too fantastically inventive in terms of their 'reason why'. Meisner is frequently at pains to bring his students down to earth, telling Bruce to be motivated by one hundred dollars rather than a million because the smaller figure is more believable and will therefore be more effective. He tells Bruce, 'It's not imaginative to say a million dollars. It's exaggerated and false' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 123).

44). Telling the students that their activities must be urgent might only serve to make them base their motivations in reasons that are more remote from their own lives. This would undermine the dynamics of the exercise as we have described them because the students would not be bringing *their* world on to stage, and it would be very easy for them to slip into pretence, or representation, for the audience. When one of Meisner's students, Lila, does this for other reasons, he shouts, 'God almighty, woman, stop acting! I can't stand it!' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 54). Meisner makes this point to his class when he criticises a particular Repetition exercise by telling the participants that, 'I'm not really crazy about the fact that you're already playing a scene' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 65). There are two significant conclusions we can draw from Meisner keeping the actors from 'acting' in this way. The first is that he appears to be consciously preventing his actors from slipping into pretence or representation at this stage. In doing so, Meisner keeps his technique from becoming irrevocably tethered to the paradigm of realistic representational theatre. Instead he creates a foundation of pre-performative training upon which the production of a range of genres and modes of performance might be based. More immediately, what is clear is that Meisner is looking for his students to achieve something other than simple pretence. This seems to be the reason that he rebukes Lila for 'acting' and warns his students against performing a scene before they have become familiar with the demands of the exercises.

We can now see that the physical and the existential aspects of the Independent Activity exercise combine to produce two effects: to limit the actor's attention in terms of their chain of significances (existentially), and in terms of their environment (spatially). It is an important psychophysical property of the Independent Activity exercise that the physical and existential aspects of the exercise bleed out of their respective territories, allowing both to simultaneously affect the other aspect of the actor's experience. Weaving together the two modes of experience in this manner creates a mutually supporting dynamic that strengthens the effect of the exercise.

## Section Five: The Knock at the Door

Now that we have seen the dynamic of the Independent Activity exercise and the effect that it has on the experience of the actor who is engaged in it, we are able to explore the consequences for this actor, and the exercise as a whole, when the second actor is introduced to the performance area. Meisner asks the second student to start outside the classroom and to knock on the door. The first student then opens the door and verbalises their impression of their partner's knock in what becomes the first line of a Repetition exercise. As the exercise continues, the first student returns to their Independent Activity and continues to immerse themselves in it (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 38-9). While the second actor has only one task (to play the Repetition exercise), the first actor has two tasks, to perform their Independent Activity and 'Repeat' with their partner.

Drawing the conclusions that we reached at the end of the Repetition chapter into the discussion, the first thing that becomes apparent is that we have a new stimulus to start the Repetition. Previously it was necessary to make a provocative statement in order to start the exercise off, from which point the reactions of the participants enabled it to be sustained. Now, however, the first actor's interpretation of the knock at the door replaces the provocative statement as the first line of the Repetition exercise. Meisner explains how this should happen in the following instructions to his class:

*The first moment of the exercise is the knock. The exercise begins with the knock. The second moment is the opening of the door, and the third moment is your interpretation of the knock. The third moment is the meaning the knock has for you. Do whatever the third moment permits you to do and then go back to your independent activity and let the exercise continue.*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 46)

It might not be immediately apparent how the interpretation of a knock could instigate a response of the same magnitude as a provocative statement. However, to see why such a potentially mundane opening does have the potential to be a strong enough catalyst to call forth reactions that will allow the exercise to sustain itself, we have to return to the

phenomenological dynamics we have been laying out. Because the Independent Activity restricts the concentration of the first actor to their activity and therefore prevents them from accessing any ‘pre-established circuits’ regarding the rest of their environment, they are forced to react more impulsively to the knock than if they had been concentrating their attention on it. This means that the deliberation and self-conscious attempt to provoke their acting partner has been removed from the exercise and the impulsiveness of the reaction to the knock at the door provides the initial spark that we recognised as necessary in the Repetition chapter.

The impulsiveness that begins the exercise through the reaction to the knock at the door continues throughout the exercise because the first actor continues to immerse themselves in their activity. This is a vital part of the dynamic of the exercise as Meisner makes clear by his frequent direction to the actors to continue doing their activity, and not be distracted by the fact that they also have to Repeat with their partner. In a recording from the archives of the Sanford Meisner Center, Meisner tells a student,

*You seem to have a legitimate independent activity, but you're not doing it whole-heartedly, you see? Because she's here. What's missing from you is that you're not waiting for something to really come off of him. You're too anxious to play the word repetition.*

(Meisner, 2006: 106:00)

This makes it clear that the actor must continue to engage in their activity ‘whole-heartedly’ until ‘something ... really come[s] off’ them for their partner to work with. As we have seen, this wholehearted engagement has the effect of restricting the attention of the actor in two ways: spatially, and in terms of their human significances. The spatial localisation of their attention on their activity means that the first actor is forced to respond impulsively to the second actor in the Repetition exercise, just as they were to the knock at the door. The Independent Activity exercise forces those human significances irrelevant to the task into a ‘hidden compartment’ and immerses the actor in the ‘consuming reality’ of the task they have chosen. This makes the first actor respond to the second actor, who is attempting to engage

them in Repetition, more impulsively because their wider concern (to *be* a good actor by performing the exercise well) is temporarily shut off from them.

The effect of these processes is noted by the narrator's description of the first Independent Activity in *Sanford Meisner on Acting*:

*It is essentially unchanged, except that Vince's attention is fixed on solving the problem of locating K.Z. Smith, a task made more difficult by Anna's insistent pursuit of playing the word game. The result is that the dialogue is more focused, and there are more impulsive shifts in its direction, more surprises.*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39)

This description shows the observable effects of the actor's phenomenal processes in the dynamic of the Independent Activity exercise. Put simply, the Repetition exercise becomes more impulsive because one of the actors is engaged with an Independent Activity. However, when we apply the perspectives of the key phenomenologists we used to explore the Repetition exercise in the last chapter, we are able to see further levels of significance to this process.

Merleau-Ponty's perspective showed us that in Repetition, the encounter with another person offered the possibility of communication and thereby of establishing an objective reality. However, especially once the exercise is initiated by the provocative statement and allowed to progress from 'meaningful moment to meaningful moment', it demonstrates a continual and futile attempt to catch up to the perspective the other person occupies. In this rendering of the exercise, it is this attempt to establish communication with the other person that provides the fuel for the exercise to continue. Once the Independent Activity has been included in this dynamic, further obstacles are placed before the actors in their attempt to occupy the other's perspective. For one thing the increased impulsiveness of the first actor makes their perspective less stable, and therefore less able to be grasped by the second actor. The second reason that communication is made more difficult by the Independent Activity exercise is that the first person never makes the meaning of their activity explicit. The only dialogue between the actors at this stage of the exercise centres around the behaviour of the other person,

meaning that the significance of the activity to the first actor is never explained. This results in further barriers being put between the second actor and the perspective of the first actor which, according to Merleau-Ponty's theories, they are attempting to share in order to establish objective reality. Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, by making the exercise less stable and allowing for more 'surprises', the Independent Activity exercise makes the dynamic between the two actors more impulsive. As we discovered in the Observation chapter, the perspective of the individual actor is a vital element in their process of accessing their impulses and therefore means that they are able to harness their own reality and stance on the world for the execution of the Independent Activity exercise.

From Levinas' perspective, the manner in which the Independent Activity forces the first actor's attention away from their fellow player means that they allow more room for their partner's transcendence. This means that the second actor, who does not have the Independent Activity, is not forced by the gaze and explicit attention of the first to conform to any totalising perspective on the world, but is allowed the freedom to escape such a confining definition. By fixing their attention on the first actor's behaviour and attempting to verbalise it, the second actor ensures that the discourse can continue. However, what complicates this picture is that by the person executing the Independent Activity turning their attention away from their partner, they withdraw from a face-to-face encounter to some extent. By not giving their partner their full attention, it could be seen that the person executing the Independent Activity are treating their partner as less than the transcendent being that they should be considered as according to Levinas' ethics, and are therefore in danger of regarding them as just another object in their environment – literally objectifying them.

At a practical level, it might seem a dangerous strategy to make one actor withdraw into a personal and consuming activity if the object of the exercise is to make two actors interact as fully as possible. The self-absorption of the actor with the Independent Activity might be the hazard that makes it necessary for them to stop what they are doing, open the door, and tell

their partner their impression of the knock. Meisner calls this phase of the training, where Repetition is combined with Independent Activities, the Three Moment Exercise. This name puts the focus on the beginning of the exercise where the two actors are forced to interact.

This makes it clear that, rather than the actor with the activity to perform being allowed to simply immerse themselves in that activity and close themselves off from their partner, a direct confrontation with the other person is built into the structure of the exercise. By answering the door and telling their partner their interpretation of the knock, they are forced to address the other actor ‘face-to-face’ before returning to their activity. This creates a similar process to that we saw in the Independent Activity itself where Meisner layers different and conflicting requirements on to the actor in order to establish certain tensions in the way that they relate to the world. We saw that the ‘transparent coping’ the actor is being asked to engage in by practicing an activity that they have some ability for and a human need to perform is disrupted by the difficulty of the activity. Here the activity is once again interrupted by the necessity of directly addressing their fellow performer before returning to their task. From Levinas’ standpoint, this moment where the actor with the activity is forced to acknowledge the transcendence of their partner by addressing them face-to-face leads them to be torn between two perspectives; they have their own human and physical aims and goals, but are also forced into contact with that which is outside their comprehension and control in the form of The Other. This opens their activity up to the world and initiates a discourse with their partner in which the reality that they have been rigorously establishing through their Independent Activity is now put into dialogue with a perspective of absolute alterity. At every stage of the Repetition exercise that follows, their reality is shifted by the interjections from The Other. This means that their activity, that should be hugely significant to them, changes and transforms as their perspective on it is shifted by their discourse with The Other. This analysis would account for the increased number of ‘impulsive shifts’ and ‘surprises’ that arise from the Repetition exercise when performed according to these conditions.

This is precisely the manner in which the ethics that Levinas describes in ‘face-to-face’ encounters with The Other are directly relevant to the dynamics at the heart of the Meisner Technique. The discourse between the subject’s personal world that is rigorously established by the Independent Activity and the perspectives of absolute transcendence introduced by their ‘face-to-face’ meeting with The Other is the embodiment of Levinas’ subjective ethics. This is, of course, distinct from ethical systems based upon rational judgement which would in fact impinge upon the ethics that Levinas proposes by confining the transcendence of The Other within totalising moral frameworks. Levinas speaks directly about this issue when he claims that, ‘The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed’ (Levinas, 1969: 143). Derrida astutely concludes that Levinas’ ethics, ‘can occasion neither a determined ethics nor determined laws without negating and forgetting itself’ (Derrida, 1980: 111). By this, Derrida is describing the way that Levinas’ ethical approach is undermined and discredited by any attempt to make objective judgements because of its foundation within the subjective realm. Its basis in the experience of the subject means that to step outside this, and to attempt to reconcile that experience with objective judgement totalises the experience into overarching moral frameworks that are inherently unethical according to Levinas. This distinction between objective and subjective ethics will become important in Chapter Five when I discuss the detrimental effects of the actor making such rational judgements in the moment of performance.

This interpretation of the Three Moment Exercise that incorporates Independent Activities and Repetition, from the perspective of Levinas’ theories shows how Meisner’s training is manipulating the actors’ perception of the world in order to create a certain dynamic. This dynamic arises through a particular layering of relationships that create tensions within the actor’s experience of the world and their engagement with it. We can see that the training is operating phenomenologically here rather than ‘intellectually’ in the sense that the actor fashions their performance through their engagement with certain tasks rather than by trying to create specific, pre-planned effects. As we shall see in the following chapter, this

performance can be shaped and moulded in order to alter its quality and to achieve desired effects, but these changes must not be approached directly, but through the actor's direct engagement with the world so that these qualities and effects can arise organically.

All of these perspectives on the Independent Activity exercise reinforce that it is essentially based in the particular perspective of the actor and therefore utilises their own reality rather than any pretence or a perspective assumed from the fictional representation. The three aspects of the Meisner actor's being-in-the-world that we have analysed over the last three chapters combine to establish their relationship to their environment, other people, and their actions. Although we have dealt with each of these relationships in isolation as far as possible, it is readily apparent that such a separation is artificial and that it is the interdependence of these relationships that create the actor's perception of the world. As we shall see in the next chapter, the actors in Meisner's classroom are able to harness this particular relationship to the world in order to perform modern, realist theatre. However, because this stance on the world is based on phenomenologically-aligned principles, it is not wholly circumscribed by this paradigm, but in fact resonates strongly with some examples of postmodern performance. When we discuss the resonances between the Meisner Technique and the postmodern field in Chapter Five and trace the connections between its dynamics and the processes of particular postmodern directors in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, we will see the ways in which the Meisner Technique creates continuities between modern, realist theatre and postmodern performance.

# Meisner and Phenomenological Realism

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The previous chapters have been devoted to establishing the phenomenal relationships that are fostered by the Meisner Technique between the actor and their environment, their co-performers, and the actions they undertake. In order to show the continuities that the Meisner Technique creates between modern, realist theatre and certain instances of postmodern performance I need to demonstrate how these relationships can be harnessed by the actor in order to perform in the first of these modes. Once this has been established, in Chapter Five I will be able to identify those elements in the processes Meisner instigates in the actors he trains that resonate with particular strands of the postmodern field and relate this in the following three chapters to the practices involved in certain instances of postmodern performance. Together these chapters will provide evidence for my claim that the Meisner Technique is an example of continuity between these two divergent paradigms of theatre/performance, a status that is made possible by the phenomenologically-aligned principles that underpin it.

Once Meisner has solidly oriented his students to the ‘foundation of acting’ that I have laid out in the preceding three chapters, he leads them through a number of processes that form a superstructure upon it. It is this part of the methodology that allows the actor to perform in the particular incarnation of naturalist-derived realism that dominated theatre for the bulk of Meisner’s career and that he predominantly worked towards with his students. We shall see in Chapter Five that this superstructure is not an essential part of the technique, but in order to establish the continuities that Meisner’s Technique creates between the two paradigms of theatre/performance I am examining we need to first establish how Meisner’s foundation supports the superstructure of modern, realist convention.

To begin with it is vital that we identify precisely what defines modern, realist theatre as a mode of performance, and how my phenomenological interpretation of it differs from the

psychological views of it that have thus far dominated the discourse. J.L. Styan charts the emergence of realism in theatre and identifies the centrality of psychological frameworks to its discussion. He writes that, 'It was the development of the realistic movement at the turn of the nineteenth century which introduced *genuine* psychological thinking into the theatre's world of the unreal, but it was only at stage level, in the work of the actor' (Styan, 1983: 259). Styan also recognizes that it was Stanislavsky's work at the Moscow Arts Theatre that most fully realised this mode of performance, claiming that it was a sensitivity to psychological concerns that empowered his approach. Styan writes that Stanislavsky's, 'work showed less of the trappings of external realism and more of the inner qualities of psychological realism' (Styan, 1983: 260). The distinction that is vital for this discussion is between 'surface realism' and the 'psychological underpinnings' that made it possible for Stanislavsky to achieve this (*ibid*). By separating these elements of Stanislavsky's work, Styan demonstrates that while it was a psychological approach that allowed Stanislavsky to generate realist theatre, it might also be possible to generate this mode of performance with alternative approaches. Given the synergy we have seen between Meisner's acting methodology and various phenomenological principles, and the fact that Meisner primarily worked towards the production of realist theatre, it is my contention that rather than working within the tradition of *psychological* realism, Meisner's Technique would be more appropriately defined as *phenomenological* realism. It is important to reassert that Meisner never overtly identified himself with phenomenological theories, but that his intuitive method of working can be seen to be aligned with them because of the number of key principles that they share.

Modern, realist theatre makes a number of specific and distinctive demands on the actor. In this chapter I will be looking at those particular elements that make it necessary for Meisner to adapt his approach in order to actualise this mode of theatre. The first of these elements is the convention by which realist theatre asserts a unity of character that depends upon certain fictional circumstances that are not actually performed. I will examine the phenomenal implications of this convention on the actor as well as Meisner's method of serving it through

the process of Emotional Preparation. I will apply Heidegger's theoretical framework of 'chains of significance' to the Emotional Preparation exercise and distinguish it from the 'emotion memory' practiced by Strasberg and early Stanislavsky. The second requirement of modern, realist theatre that I will examine is that the actor must recite a pre-written text. I will analyse how Meisner's insistence that the actors learn the script 'by rote' creates a phenomenal dynamic that allows for this recitation without interrupting the instinctual foundation that we have examined in the first three chapters. In this discussion I will make particular use of Merleau-Ponty's discussion of 'habitual action' to show how this integration is executed. The third element of realist theatre that I will examine here is the convention by which the actor represents a fictional character. I will demonstrate how the Meisner actor applies Stanislavsky's tool of particularisation at the rehearsal stage in order that they may then behave with instinctive spontaneity in the moment of performance. In this discussion, Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the 'unity of perception' and the 'intentional arc' will help us understand how this preparatory work allows the actor to exchange elements of their personal world for others so that their behaviour may be read as that of a specific fictional character.

After I have explored the phenomenal implications of the ways that Meisner overcomes these three requirements of modern realist theatre, I will discuss the Spoon River exercise that is Meisner's alternative technique to perform in this mode of performance through the 'bringing together' of the actor's perspective with that of a fictional character. Once I have traced these practical methods and their phenomenological implications, I will show how they coalesce in the actor's perception of the world through engaged action in order to fulfil the demands placed upon them by modern, realist theatre. To do this I will make particular reference to the final pages of *Sanford Meisner On Acting* where we see Meisner working through the application of the Technique to realist texts through textual interpretation and discussion of the given circumstances.

The first feature of realist theatre that Meisner accommodates within his technique is its reliance on a 'unity of character' that depends upon certain fictional circumstances that are

not actually performed. When a character is seen entering through a door in a naturalistically realistic play, it is intended that this represents the character coming from *somewhere*. None of this should be mistaken for a literal claim that the character is coming from somewhere, but rather that the ideal audience member of modern, realist drama would construct a narrative in which the character has a life prior to and outside of the stage moment. Styan argues that it is the audience's attempt to maintain a unity of the characters represented to them that necessitates this activity. He says that, 'In the theatre we experience an isomorphic response to all that is going on ... the imagination draws upon the world of the play before that of real life, and refuses to destroy the established pattern of the characters' integrity' (Styan, 1983: 267). Of course we cannot assume how any particular audience member will perceive a theatrical event, but we can at least state that this is generally taken as an understanding on the basis of which modern, realist plays have been produced.

This widely accepted convention of realist theatre poses a problem for the actor who is working with the foundation that the Meisner Technique has given them. If a character is represented as having come from an imaginary place and/or having experienced imaginary events, how is this portrayed by 'the reality of doing' the actor engages with on the stage? The defining characteristic of all of the phenomenal relationships we have seen operating in Meisner's Technique is the actor's impulsive, instinctive engagement with the reality of their world and it would therefore be problematic to now replace this with a fictional pretence. In short, we can see how Meisner's exercises prepare the actor to interact with the reality of the present moment of performance, but something more is required in order to account for the convention of the spatial and temporal extension of a fictional reality beyond that moment. Meisner's answer to this is Emotional Preparation which, 'is that device which permits you to start your scene or play in a condition of emotional aliveness. The purpose of preparation is so that you do not come in emotionally empty' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 78).

The term ‘emotionally empty’ is problematic in that it paints the actor as a ‘self’, a sort of container, that can be full or empty of emotion. In order to reconcile this with the phenomenal theories of emotion that we have discussed so far we might take Meisner’s statement to mean that the preparation allows the actor to begin the scene in an emotionally appropriate fashion. As our phenomenological analyses in the previous chapters have shown, emotion is less a material substance than a quality of the relationships that arise as consequences of human values. With Emotional Preparation Meisner is attempting to get his students to begin their scenes with emotional states that are more appropriate to the circumstances their characters are living under. An example that Meisner uses to illustrate the function of Emotional Preparation is particularly helpful in understanding this point:

*In the last century, the English actor William Charles Macready, before playing a certain scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, used to try to shake the iron ladder backstage that was embedded in the brick. He’d try and try, and would get furious because he couldn’t budge it. Then he went on and played the scene.*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 80)

As Styan notes, ‘even the best craftsmanship is not quite enough for Lear, Andromache, or Faust’, by which he means that these characters demand an emotional intensity that goes beyond the purely technical (Styan, 1983: 264). However, Meisner’s point is less about the intensity of emotion (which we might assume from his term ‘emotionally empty’) than it is about emotional appropriateness, something he makes clear by telling his class that Macready’s preparation could just as readily be used for a less heightened drama. He says, ‘It could be that he got furious at the ladder and then went on to play the fact that his girl had kept him waiting in front of Radio City for an hour and a half ... I’m presenting you with the premise, “Don’t come in empty”’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 80). It is highly likely that Meisner employs the term ‘emotionally empty’ pragmatically in order to ensure his actors approach the task in a particular way rather than allowing them to understand what they are doing in an objective, rational manner. By saying that Macready’s preparation could be used for a less heightened drama, Meisner is taking his students’ focus away from the ‘amount’ of

emotion deployed and putting it on to the appropriateness of that emotion within different contexts. This makes it possible for us to conclude that Meisner's Emotional Preparation is a tool that enables the actor to enter the stage in an emotionally appropriate fashion. By providing a tool that facilitates this, Meisner is adapting his acting approach to the demand that modern, realist theatre makes on actors that they respect the unity of character that extends the characters' fictional reality beyond the playing space and into the past.

Emotional Preparation is not a device that allows the actor to embody every successive emotion called for by their character's journey through a play, but one that enables them to begin a scene in an emotional state that is appropriate to the circumstances that the play suggests the character is living under. Meisner is careful to ensure the students understand this distinction by stressing that, 'preparation lasts only for the first moment of the scene, and then you never know what's going to happen' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 78). Alternatively, as Meisner puts it in *Masterclass*, 'once you knock at that door, whatever brought you here has to be forgotten. The rest of it depends on her' (Meisner, 2006: 1:44:00). We will return to the effect that Emotional Preparation has on the fuller dynamic of realist scene work later, but it is important to note here that the requirement that the preparation 'lasts only for the first moment of the scene' directly addresses the unity of character that modern, realist theatre relies upon, and that suggests an extension of the characters' fictional reality beyond the stage area in both time and space. By focusing Emotional Preparation on the first moment of the scene, Meisner is ensuring the actors do not allow it to interfere with their full engagement in the moment of performance. In fact, Meisner very consciously differentiates his approach from Stanislavsky and Strasberg's 'emotion memory' on this point.

One reason that 'emotion memory' is not compatible with the foundation of acting that the Meisner Technique has built up is precisely that it is not confined tightly enough to the first moment of the scene. This emerges from a discussion about Strasberg's 'Method Acting' between Meisner and Ray, one of his students. Ray says,

*"the way that Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio people use ... make[s] you go inside, and you can get stuck in there."*

*"That's right. I told Lee that when he was alive. I said to him, 'You introvert the already introverted. All actors,' I said, 'like all artists, are introverted because they live on what's going on in their instincts, and to attempt to make that conscious is to confuse the actor.'*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 59)

The language that is employed in this exchange is very telling and relates specifically to this issue that distinguishes 'emotion memory' from Emotional Preparation. Ray's reference to getting 'stuck inside' could be interpreted as meaning that in order for actors to attain the required emotional state through 'emotion memory', it is necessary for them to retreat from their engagement with the world, and they are not always able to re-establish it. The consequence of this is that 'emotion memory' lasts for more than the first moment of the scene and therefore dampens down the actor's engagement with the world around them. Or as Meisner more concisely states, emotion memory 'introvert[s] the already introverted'. This difference in approach points towards the differences between the objective, rational perspective that Strasberg's use of psychology requires and the subjective, engaged perspective of Meisner's approach that is more compatible with phenomenological principles.

The issue of introversion versus extraversion is not as clear-cut as it might seem however, because, although Meisner stresses that Emotional Preparation is for the first moment of the scene only, it is apparent that its effects linger beyond this. The continuing influence of Emotional Preparation is evident in the criticism Meisner offers to a scene between Dave and Lila, for which Dave has emotionally prepared. Meisner tells them that, 'It's all right, nothing wrong with it, but it's a question of quantity, not quality. ... Both of you have always had reality in this scene. It never achieved the fullness it might have. But you always had emotions of the right quality. I'm talking about fullness at the beginning, that's all' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 90-1). This clearly illustrates that the effect of the first moment, that the Emotional Preparation has shaped, affects the rest of the scene and lends the whole scene more 'fullness' than it would otherwise have. Similarly to when Meisner warned his students not to 'come in empty', I would suggest that he employs the terms 'quantity' and 'fullness' pragmatically to

encourage his students to achieve a particular kind of engagement with their task. In the vocabulary of this phenomenological analysis, these words might be taken to refer to the completeness with which the actor commits to the activity in question. For example, we saw in the Independent Activity chapter that the qualities of difficulty, a ‘reason why’, and urgency require the actor to invest themselves more ‘fully’ in their activity and therefore relate to other aspects of their environment with greater spontaneity. In the case of Emotional Preparation, we might similarly see the ‘fullness’ that Meisner is asking Dave and Lila to achieve stems from the degree to which Dave invests in his Preparation before the scene begins.

The key to understanding the difference between the ‘emotion memory’ and Emotional Preparation is that while the Emotional Preparation shapes the first moment of the scene but is then dropped so that it is the after-effect of the preparation that colours the rest of the scene, the actor who adheres to Strasberg’s principles might draw upon an emotional memory throughout a scene. In an explanation of emotion memory, Strasberg says that, ‘Re-living a specific traumatic or joyful experience is the way to access a sequence of behavior and express emotions when certain scenes are particularly demanding’ (Strasberg, 2010: 27). This description suggests a durational process that lasts beyond the first moment of a scene and extends into the ‘sequence of behaviour’ that is performed. This subtle difference means that in the case of ‘emotion memory’ the actor may continue to consciously engage with their memory through the scene, while the Emotional Preparation shapes the perspective of the actor, and then it is this transformed person who engages in the scene. Meisner makes this explicit to Rose Marie, one of his students, in his feedback about her Emotional Preparation. He tells her, ‘before you began to think about what you would do with the money, you were one kind of person. Then, when the idea of the prize money began to play on you, you were not the same person. You were Rose Marie in a full state of happiness’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 84). This means that Emotional Preparation shifts the perspective of the actor, allowing them to remain open and fully engaged with their present reality while ‘emotion memory’

requires the student to draw their emotion from their memory of a past experience, dampening down their engagement with their present reality. This suggests that one reason the Emotional Preparation allows the actor to engage in the reality of doing on stage is that it provides a one-off shift of their perspective, rather than an on-going focus on their emotional state.

The divergence between Meisner's approach and Strasberg's Method Acting brings the opposed frameworks they are operating within into sharp focus. The psychological tools of Method Acting require the actor to treat themselves as an abstract entity that they view and manipulate from an objective, constructed perspective. This split in their consciousness means that they engage in the action required by the scene they are performing at the same time as they are viewing themselves as a scientific object. By directing their focus inwards on to their psyche rather than outwards into the world, they run the risk of getting 'stuck in there' as Ray recognises. The phenomenologically-aligned tools, that Meisner's Technique furnishes actors with, preserve a unity in the actor's perspective that allows them to keep their focus on the world around them. The difference can be seen as an opposition between the centripetal focus of Method Acting and the centrifugal attention of the Meisner actor. By altering their perspective before a scene begins, the Meisner actor is spared the necessity of focussing on their internal processes during the performance of the scene and is therefore able to more fully invest themselves in the phenomenal relationships with their environment, other actors and their actions.

One further reason that Meisner distinguishes his approach from Strasberg's 'emotion memory' is that his students may not have had an experience that measures up to the intensity or the particular nature of the emotion required by the scene to make 'emotion memory' effective. To make up for the potentially deficient experience of his students in Emotional Preparation, Meisner tells them that 'what you're looking for is not necessarily confined to the reality of your life. It can be in your imagination' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987:

79). However, at a deeper level than the circumstantial possibility that their life experience does not meet the emotional demands of a particular scene, Meisner's use of imagination as opposed to memory relates to the phenomenological framework he is creating as opposed to the psychological grounding of Strasberg's approach. Meisner tells his students that, 'preparation is a kind of daydreaming ... which causes a transformation in your inner life, so that you are not what you actually were five minutes ago, because your fantasy is working on you' (*ibid*). The primary difference between imaginative 'daydreaming' and recalling an emotional experience is that the former operates in the present tense. Although Strasberg says that, 'It's how you're affected by that memory today that becomes the emotional memory' (Strasberg, 2010: 27), it is doubtful whether a memory can be distinguished from the emotions that were part of the original experience. As we saw in Merleau-Ponty's argument for the unity of perception, the emotional content of an experience is necessarily bound together with its physical elements (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 157). By treating the memory as a purely physical scenario onto which a present emotional perception is applied, the actor is simultaneously denying the real perception of their past self, and projecting themselves into that past, thereby denying their current perspective on their world. By contrast, through Emotional Preparation the Meisner actor projects their present self into a situation where the desired emotion is evoked as a response to that present situation. 'Daydreaming' in this way allows the actor to apply circumstances to who they are at that moment and thereby alter the perspective from which they view the world. By drawing the emotional circumstance into their present world, they are making it affect who they are in that moment. The operation of this dynamic clearly illustrates that the Meisner Technique preserves a large degree of unity in the actor's perceptual experience and shows how closely aligned it is with phenomenological constructs.

One further argument that Meisner makes against 'emotion memory' is that, 'Over time the meaning of the past changes. That's one of the reasons I don't like "emotion memory," and that's one of the reasons Stanislavsky gave it up' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 82-3). This puts

the problems of using memory to elicit emotion into sharp focus by highlighting the instability of its effects on the actor's present perspective. Imagination is harnessed by Meisner because it begins from who the actor is in the present and allows their emotional state to be manipulated while still foregrounding their perception of the world that they engage with through the 'reality of doing'.

All of the preceding arguments demonstrate that Emotional Preparation supports the conventions of modern, realist theatre by ensuring the actor enters the playing space with an emotional state that takes into account what the audience is led to believe has happened to their character prior to the scene beginning and outside the physical space it occurs in. Furthermore, because the actor is able to incorporate this emotional appropriateness into their personal world they are free to engage fully in the instinctive relationships with their environment, the other performers, and their actions that we have found to be the defining characteristics of Meisner's 'foundation of acting'.

The most obvious alteration that Meisner must make to his 'foundation of acting' in order to bring it into alignment with modern, realist theatre is to incorporate the recitation of a pre-written script into it. Meisner indicates the significance of this challenge when he tells the class that, 'The text is your greatest enemy' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 136). Throughout the early part of Meisner's training all of the exercises have been improvisational, in the sense that the only words spoken are those that occur spontaneously to the actors. In order to perform modern, realistic theatre however, the students must recite pre-written lines. Asking the actors to recite the same lines every time they perform a particular scene appears to conflict with the instinctive, spontaneous action that Meisner has been urging his students to engage in. We will now look at how Meisner negotiates this tension and the effect that this adaption of his approach has on the phenomenal processes of the actors who practice it.

When Meisner gives his class scenes for the first time, he says, 'I want you to take your script and learn it *without* readings, *without* interpretation, *without anything*. Just learn the lines by

rote, mechanically' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 67, emphasis in original). Bette, one of his students, after working on a scene in this way says, 'I felt that it's so raw and so untouched when we do it by rote that what we can add to it emotionally is unlimited because we are free of immediately insisting that it be read one way or another' (ibid). Meisner confirms Bette's assumption and clarifies that he is, 'insisting on this mechanical approach in order to avoid calculated results' (ibid). Rote-learning is therefore the first step towards integrating the pre-written text of modern, realist theatre with the instinctive foundation of acting that Meisner has established.

The mechanical process of rote-learning echoes the earliest stages of Repetition where we noted that Meisner spoke in similar terms about that process: 'It's mechanical, it's inhuman, but it's the basis for something' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 22). In Chapter Two we noted that Repetition initially strips the meaning of the words away so that the students will focus on the behaviour of their partner rather than the rational meaning of the words they are speaking. At a basic level the rote-learning of lines is operating in a similar manner by removing any objective notion of what the words might mean so that the actors will focus on the behaviour of their partner. Meisner is explicit about this purpose when he tells his class that,

*In order to build up performances which are coming out of you, which are coming out of your emotional grasp of the material, I choose to reduce you to a neutral, meaningless, inhuman object—a robot, call it what you like. In order to fill those words with the truth of your emotional life you're first going to learn the text coldly, without expression, in a completely neutral way.*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 68)

The further element of the process that comes out of this statement is that Meisner is instructing the students to recite the lines mechanically in order that they can later fill it with the truth of *their* emotional life which comes out of *their* emotional grasp of the subject. Here we can see Meisner drawing the students back to the principles he stressed in the early stages of the training that, as we discovered in the Observation chapter, anchored them in their

particular perspective on the world. It may be necessary for him to do this at this stage in order to prevent their interpretation of the text from drawing them away from the relationships they have been cultivating throughout the training. Ultimately, when Meisner allows the students to move beyond the mechanical recitation it will be their grasp of the world around them, made up of the physical and emotional relationships that they have been fostering through their training, that will colour the text.

The way Meisner tells his students to initially rehearse the scene with each other takes this approach to script work one step further. He says to, ‘with ease, take a walk with your partner ... and go over the text so that you know yours and she knows hers. If you want to stop off and get a cup of coffee, it’s okay with me. Do the lines then’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 67). This makes it apparent that a mechanical recitation is not sufficient for Meisner’s purposes, but that it is necessary the students are at ease, even casual, with the lines. Just as he does not want them creating any calculated readings of the text, neither does he want them to focus too tightly on the activity of speaking mechanically. As confirmation of this, Meisner criticises Dave’s mechanical recitation of his lines for, ‘overemphasizing the mechanicalness of it, the syllable by syllable’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 70). As we saw with the Independent Activities exercise, the actor’s relationship with action through the unity of perception is a very carefully crafted connection. Such a sensitive dynamic would therefore be disrupted if the student were to focus their attention on the activity of reciting lines because it might block the connections of human significance between them and their actions. In the Independent Activity exercise, the actions of the actor are carefully chosen with the attributes of difficulty and urgency in mind and an overt focus on the recitation of a memorised text might therefore reduce the spontaneity with which the actor relates to their partner because it does not possess these qualities. Just as significantly, from Heidegger’s perspective, reciting a memorised text is an ontic ‘towards-which’ that leads directly to the ‘for-the-sake-of’ of the student *being* a good actor. Such a move would draw these elements of their human chains of significance out of the obscurity that the difficulty and urgency required by an Independent

Activity purposefully introduced. If these significances are brought out of the ‘hidden compartment’ into which they have been stowed, the actor’s scope of attention will be widened beyond the specific tasks that are necessary to fulfil the demands of the particular mode of theatre they are performing. In the most extreme case, this widening of the awareness of the actor may make them literally self-conscious as they attempt to assess whether or not they are achieving their ultimate ‘for-the-sake-of’ and being a good actor. Such a process of self-objectification would lessen the degree to which the actors can engage in the specific phenomenal relationships that the Meisner Technique requires. If part of the actor’s consciousness is devoted to an objective, rational appraisal of their situation, they will not be able to invest themselves as fully in the ‘reality of doing’ that allows them to successfully operate in that situation.

The next stage in Meisner’s integration of the pre-written scripts of realist theatre into his acting approach requires the students to move beyond mechanical recitation to the level of ‘human conversation’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 72). At this point Meisner emphasises that the students should be focussed on the, ‘picking up not of cues but of impulses’ (*ibid*). Rather than the actors being driven to speak when they hear the words from the script that come directly before theirs, they should use the impulses they feel as their cause to speak. It is at this point that the words that are spoken regain some of their objective significance that can then play a part in causing the actor to experience impulses. However, because the earlier mechanical stage has stripped the objective meaning of the words away, this new meaning incorporates a greater degree of subjectivity and therefore takes its significance from the personal perspective of the actor. In this way the meaning of the script is contextualised into the personal world of the actor, and the scene work therefore achieves Meisner’s goal of having the meaning of the words come out of the reality of the actor’s own, ‘emotional grasp of the material’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 68). Accordingly, Meisner tells the class to work off both their partner’s behaviour *and* the text (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 73), but the text

is now integrated into the actor's personal intentional arc and therefore forms just one part of their whole unity of perception.

This doesn't completely explain how the process is working however, because for the foundation that Meisner has established to integrate the pre-written scripts of modern, realist theatre, the actors cannot speak as soon as the impulse arises without disrupting the lines as the playwright has written them. It is here that the modernist requirement that the play translate the author's intentions directly to the audience with as little interference from the production as possible impinges on the foundation of spontaneous behaviour that Meisner has established. In order to remain faithful to the written text, Meisner tells his students to, 'wait for the cue', but, '*pick up the impulses*' (*ibid*, emphasis in original). It is the thorough grasp of the lines in the mechanical, casual style that rote-learning allows that means waiting for the cue need not interfere with the picking up of impulses. To draw from Merleau-Ponty's model of habitual action that we discussed in the Independent Activity chapter, the rote-learning of the lines allows the actor to engage in the recitation of them through 'stable organs and pre-established circuits' that limit the spontaneity of the actor in relation to them (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 :100-1). This means that once the script is memorised to the point that the actor does not need to consciously focus on it, they do not need to fix their attention on the cues because they will habitually wait for the appropriate moment before speaking. When they do speak however, their behaviour and therefore the way they deliver the lines will be determined by the impulsive reactions to their whole unity of perception of which the lines constitute one part. It is this process that John is referring to when he says, 'I guess it's a matter of my knowing the script a lot better in order to be able to tune in to the impulses' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 72-3). This simple statement makes it clear how the thorough (and particularly habitual) knowledge of the lines leaves the actor free to 'tune in' to their impulses without corrupting the lines as they are written in the script. This dynamic illustrates how the Meisner Technique allows actors to engage in spontaneous action without abandoning the

modernist principle that the intentions of the author should be respected and transmitted as directly as possible to the audience.

Meisner makes the relationship between the exhibition of impulsive behaviour and rote-learned text most clear through a metaphor. “The text is like a canoe,” Meisner says, “and the river on which it sits is the emotion. The text floats on the river. If the water of the river is turbulent, the words will come out like a canoe on a rough river” (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 115). What is immediately apparent is that this attitude towards the text preserves its integrity, while allowing the actor’s emotion to determine the way it is delivered and therefore the meaning it makes possible. However, it does signal a deeper intrusion of modernist principles into the dynamic Meisner has been creating. If the actor’s emotion, arising from their intentional arc, can determine the meaning of the text, to ensure that the performance remains true to the author’s intentions, they must ensure that it is shaped in such a way as to create the meaning that the author intended. This is what Meisner is alluding to when he says that, ‘the life of the actor *must not* annihilate the deeper implications of the play which the playwright has written’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 191). Meisner is walking a fine line here as he attempts to emphasise the necessity for the actor to live instinctively and spontaneously while at the same time adhering to the spirit of the script that the playwright authored. This tension in Meisner’s Technique is very near the surface here as just before he warns his students against, ‘annihilat[ing] the deeper intentions of the play which the playwright has written’, he says that if they are cast in a play with a lot of stage directions (Eugene O’Neill is the example he uses) then, ‘the first thing you have to do is buy a pencil and cross them all out, because nobody, not even the playwright, can determine how a life is going to live itself out sensitively, instinctively, on the stage’ (*ibid*). This shows that despite Meisner insisting that the actor should speak the dialogue exactly as the playwright has written it and to faithfully represent the meaning they intended to create with the work, the realm of sensitive and instinctive behaviour cannot be dictated to them. This is the equivalent of saying that the

actor needs to convey the author's intended meaning but how they do that, the spontaneous behaviour and the method of creating it, is their own contribution to the theatrical event.

In the above arguments I have deliberately separated the requirement of realist theatre that the actor recite pre-written text from the closely related demand that they speak these lines as if they were the character represented by the fiction of the play. The reason I have done this is that Meisner has directly and actively opposed the concept of character at every stage of his training and this demand of modern realistic theatre therefore presents a significant incongruity when it is actualised with Meisner's Technique. While Moseley says, 'Although Meisner never specifically rejected the idea of the 'character' as something which could exist outside of the moment' (Moseley, 2005: 126), Meisner is repeatedly hostile to the use of the term 'character' in his class. Where this issue becomes slightly blurred, and Moseley's comment takes on greater significance, is in Meisner's discussion of the given circumstances of particular realist texts, and I will address this more fully at the end of this chapter.

It may seem that the representation of character is central to the realist enterprise, and in particular the work of the actor when working within this mode. Elinor Fuchs seizes on this perspective as the point of departure for her deconstruction of the concept of character by recognizing that, "Character" is a word that stands in for the entire human chain of representation and reception that theater links together' (Fuchs, 1996: 8). Meisner's insistence that 'character comes out of how you do what you do' means that the actor must shape 'how [they] do what [they] do' in order for the audience to be able to 'read' them as a character (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 156). This is where the conclusion we came to in The Independent Activities chapter returns to our argument. There we argued that it was neither the actor's self, nor the audience's interpretation of a fictional reality that define the theatrical event in isolation, but the engaged action that is carried out at the convergence of these two perspectives. What is therefore missing from our discussion of the phenomenal aspects of

Meisner's approach to acting is exactly how the actor is expected to shape the quality of their 'reality of doing' in order for the audience to be able to read a fiction from it.

It is important to note at this point that Meisner insists this work should be done in preparation for the performance, and that it is this preparation that allows the actor to engage fully in the reality of doing in the actual moment of performance (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 140). Because the actor is engaging in the reality of doing in the moment of performance and not a fictional reality, the burden of representation is shifted on to the audience.

Meisner's first and most preferred route to shaping the action of the actor in order that they might represent a character in a realist fiction is, 'living truthfully under the imaginary circumstances' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 136). Meisner draws his exemplar of this from Bernard Shaw's description of Eleanor Duse blushing as the character she is playing is embarrassed in front of her lover. Meisner says that no Emotional Preparation could have produced this effect because it happens mid-way through a scene as a response to the events occurring there. Meisner says that, 'Preparation could never have induced [the blush]. It came from her genius, her completeness in living truthfully under the imaginary circumstances' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 87). This complete acceptance, that he calls 'actor's faith' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 61), is not always achievable for every actor in every situation, and so Meisner provides some alternative methods for the actor to shape their behaviour. Before we discuss these, however, it is necessary to assess just what effect 'actor's faith' might have on the phenomenal relationships between the actor, their environment, other people, and their actions.

We have seen that, according to Heidegger, there is no phenomenal difference between objectively true elements within a person's perception and those elements that may not be objectively true, but that the person accepts as true (Heidegger, 1962: 182-8). This relates back to Husserl's focus on the phenomena of perception rather than the objective matter that is perceived through these phenomena. In order for the actor to achieve 'actor's faith', the

Meisner actor must therefore accept the fictional circumstances of the character as if they were personally subject to those same circumstances. In doing so they would immerse themselves in the situation they interpret the fictional character to be subject to during the play. At no point does the actor actively attempt to represent a fiction to the audience, they simply incorporate carefully chosen elements of the fictional character's situation into their perception of their own world. Again it is important to note that although this requires rational calculation on the part of the actor, in the moment of performance they simply enter into the engaged action that Meisner's instinctual foundation has made possible. The phenomenal relationships between the actor, their environment, other actors, and their actions are essentially unchanged from the foundation Meisner builds up through his training and that we analysed in our first three chapters. All that has changed is that the actor has accepted certain elements of the character's circumstances as if they were personally subject to them.

The main tool of the actor who is not able to achieve full 'actor's faith' is 'particularization'. A particularisation requires the actor to make a calculated decision (in the preparation for a role rather than in the actual performance of it) to treat something from their experience on stage 'as if' it were something else. Meisner firmly attributes this technique to Stanislavsky when he says, 'The phrase, "*it's as if*," is called a particularization in the pure terms used by Stanislavsky' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 137, emphasis in original). Particularizations allow the actor to craft a relationship with their world on stage so that it can be read by the audience as being the relationship between the character they represent and that character's fictional world. The actor's world, in this sense, includes their engagement with their environment, other people, and actions as we have outlined in the previous chapters. If, 'Character comes from how [the actors] do what [they] do' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 156), particularizations make it possible for character to emerge from pre-existing elements of their own world. In this way the actor's behaviour from their perspective runs parallel to the character's behaviour that the audience is able to interpret from their own perspective. These processes mean that

a particular set of behaviours from the actor can be read as a completely different sequence of behaviour by the audience. It is the collection of behaviours perceived by the audience that directly supports the representational conventions of modern, realist theatre. The similarities between ‘actor’s faith’ and particularisations are immediately apparent as they both involve the actor incorporating new elements into their perception of the world. The difference between them lies in the fact that ‘actor’s faith’ requires the actor to accept the character’s circumstances as their own, whereas particularisations require the actor to treat aspects of their environment as if they were different, pre-existing elements of their own personal world, or at least fictional circumstances that are easier for them to accept as real.

The practical route to an effective particularisation that Meisner introduces his students to is similar to the way the rote-learning of a text operates in that it is a self-conditioned response, or a habit, of grasping one thing as if it were another. In order for the actor to successfully integrate this imaginative substitution of one element of their world for another, they need to practice it to the point where they are not consciously focused on it as they perform the scene. Meisner makes this clear when he instructs his class to incorporate particularizations into their performances at the rehearsal stage and that once a desired effect has been created, to keep the particularisations as permanent parts of all subsequent performances. He says, ‘the particularizations – the *as ifs* which have been worked out in rehearsal and are now those elements that give form to your role – remain constant’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 140). There are two conclusions that we can make from Meisner’s insistence here: the first is that particularisations are used to actualise the interpretation of the script that the actor and director make; the second is that the activity of applying particularisations is the way the Meisner actor crafts a performance. The crucial phrase from Meisner’s statement is that particularizations are, ‘those elements that give form to [a] role’ (*ibid*). In the terms of the language that we have been employing in this discussion, the application of particularizations is the way the actor shapes their behaviour so that it might be read as the behaviour of a fictional character. This process allows the actors’ instinctive, spontaneous action in the

moment of performance to be structured in order to create a theatrically representational experience for the audience as part of the modern, realist paradigm.

The actor's work is therefore to shape their own perception of the world so that they are able to trust that their spontaneous behaviour will support the representational conventions of modern, realist theatre. Meisner is clear that, 'the life of the actor *must not* annihilate the deeper implications of the play which the playwright has written' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 191, emphasis in original). This is not to say that the actor must restrain their behaviour in the moment of performance, but that they should take care at the preparatory stage so that their spontaneous behaviour during the performance supports the playwright's intentions. It is in this way that Meisner's approach guides the actor to work with the demands of modern, realist theatre in order to apply the foundation built up through the early stages of the training.

Meisner introduces an interesting variation to the structured approach I have just described (that consists of Emotional Preparation, rote-learning, and interpretation applied through particularisation) when he introduces the class to the Spoon River exercise. Here the methodical approach is abandoned for a very different way of dealing with scripts. The Spoon River exercise is based on the collection of epitaphs from the fictional town of Spoon River written by Edgar Lee Masters. The students are asked to select one of the monologues that they 'have a genuine feeling for', or as Meisner also says, 'The one that's most you' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 149). Instead of rote-learning the text and then applying particularisations in order to shape their spontaneous behaviour when performing the monologue, Meisner asks them to first execute an appropriate Emotional Preparation, and then read the text as if it were the response to a question. Once they have done this they are asked to put the script to one side, Prepare again, and then improvise the essence of the speech in their own words, but including any elements of the actual text that they remember. They then Prepare again and read the text, before repeating the Preparation and improvising

again. Every time they improvise, the actor should include more and more elements of the text until they are able to precisely recite the words of the text as they perform (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 151).

Meisner says this is a process of ‘making the part your own’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 169). It is similar to the methodical process of dealing with scripts that involves rote learning, emotional preparation, and particularisations, in that it aligns the perspective of the actor with that of the character the playwright intended them to represent. The main difference is that via the Spoon River process, the actor is more instinctually approaching a state of ‘actor’s faith’ where they adopt the perspective of the character through an emotional grasp of the fictional situation. The lines are supposed to be slowly incorporated into the actor’s performance of the scene as they grasp the human significance of them. Therefore, as the actor gets closer to reciting the lines written in the script, they are also approaching the human position of the character they should be representing. Meisner tells his students that he won’t ask them to properly perform the text, ‘until I sense that you have a secure emotional grasp of the material. You must make a reality of that speech – make it your own – by giving it a real preparation’ (*ibid*). This makes it explicit that he is now approaching the performance of modern, realist scripts from a different angle; rather than securing the exact words of the text and then filling them with their emotional life, the actors are being asked to grasp the emotional situation of the character and then use this engaged perspective to shape the delivery of the text. To return to Meisner’s earlier metaphor, the students are being asked to start the river of their emotion flowing and then build the canoe to ride it. This metaphor makes it clear that as well as approaching the task of performing texts from a different angle, the Spoon River exercise also provides a less sequential method. Although the Emotional Preparation is always the first element engaged in, by switching between improvisation and reading the text, this exercise initiates a process of gradually drawing the perspective of the actor together with that the fictional character might be supposed to have.

When described in this way the similarity between Meisner's approach to Spoon Rivers and Stanislavsky's Active Analysis (as interpreted by Knebel) becomes apparent. In both practices the actor approaches a finished performance through a series of improvisations in which they incorporate progressively more and more lines from the script. I draw the comparison with Knebel's Active Analysis rather than Kedrov's Method of Physical Actions because of what Carnicke describes as the less mechanistic picture presented by the former (Carnicke, 2009: 191) and Meisner's emphasis on the emotional grasp of the material. This tempers further the classification of the Meisner Technique as Behaviourist which, through its prioritisation of stimulus and response, might suggest that it would have more in common with the Method of Physical Actions and the, 'scientific System based in the material body' (Carnicke, 2009: 14), that this practice encourages in the actor.

It is particularly interesting that, having just outlined a thorough and comprehensive method for performing modern, realist theatre, Meisner introduces the Spoon River exercise that appears to be a different means for achieving the same end. This is distinct from Stanislavsky's System where Active Analysis is commonly attributed to a later phase of his work, specifically when he was working at the Opera-Dramatic Studio in the last years of his life (Carnicke, 2009: 13). In the Meisner Technique the Spoon River exercise is presented in the same training programme as his other approach. Such a co-existence of two independent tools for the actualisation of realist texts would suggest that there are situations where the original tools he offers are less effective, and in such circumstances the Spoon River exercise might be more useful. What now falls to us to ascertain is exactly what defines those situations where it is necessary to apply the Spoon River method. Despite the fact that Meisner says, 'For our acting purposes these are not poems, nor are they in any sense to be taken as monologues or solo performances. Instead we should consider them as speeches in a play which are preceded by a cue' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 148), it remains the case that they are solo performances. This is significant because, since the very first observation exercises that I discuss in Chapter One, the actors have been working exclusively in pairs. In fact, the overriding purpose of the

Meisner Technique has been to make his students react spontaneously and instinctually to their partners. From the earliest Repetition exercise, he has stressed two principles: “*Don’t do anything unless something happens to make you do it.*” That’s one of them. The second is: “*What you do doesn’t depend on you; it depends on the other fellow*” (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 34, emphasis in original). Adhering to this doctrine means that the performance must come, not out of their ‘selves’, but from what their partner makes them do. Given this context, the reason that Meisner is teaching his students the approach set forth in the Spoon River exercise becomes clearer. When the actor has no other performers to interact with, no explicit activity to perform, and is therefore forced to craft a performance entirely out of the recitation of text, the Meisner actor would otherwise be left stranded. The Spoon River exercise therefore gives the Meisner actor a way to create a performance from nothing but their emotional grasp of a text. Therefore, even in the cases where modern, realist theatre poses the most serious challenges to the instinctual foundation that the Meisner Technique establishes, it is possible to reconcile the two.

This last conclusion is a result of my own deductions, and is not explicitly stated by Meisner. This again raises the issue of Meisner’s pedagogical technique that leads him to give his students directions that enable them to execute particular tasks to his satisfaction without allowing them to understand what they are doing from an objective, rational standpoint. Given the recurrence of this issue, it is necessary to explicitly confront it. We have stated numerous times in this work that Meisner’s Technique is more closely aligned to a subjective, phenomenological perspective than one that is based on objective, scientific facts. This distinction is crucial for an understanding of Meisner’s pedagogical technique because it means that he does not need to induce an understanding in his students about what they are doing in order for them to perform appropriately. Meisner addresses this issue directly by saying that actors, ‘live on what’s going on in their instincts, and to attempt to make that conscious is to confuse the actor’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 59). This attitude demonstrates that we need to be more specific about the form of learning that is taking place.

Rather than imparting objective facts and knowledge to his students, Meisner is encouraging them to occupy a particular perspective on their world in order to perform their function within a particular mode of performance in an appropriate fashion. This is more analogous to the physical learning of a craft or sport, where things are understood ‘in the body’ rather than intellectually. While this point is not particularly revelatory in terms of acting methodology (see Zarrilli for a prominent example), it is vital to bear this distinction in mind when analysing Meisner’s Technique so that we do not confuse it with the more objective and rational approach adopted by Strasberg with his Method Acting.

As an illustration of this point, Elizabeth Stroppel’s generally perceptive feminist critique of ‘Method Acting’ shows the dangers of confusing the modes of performance particular acting methodologies are aiming to serve. She cites the example of a particular female acting teacher who uses the Repetition exercise to emotionally manipulate one of her students (whose gender is not specified) by encouraging them to behave in a certain way toward their acting partner. Stroppel’s objection here is that, ‘Rather than seeking to validate women’s own emotional control as subjects, the particular construction of the repetition exercise has the potential to foster the false cliché of women as victims of their emotions’ (Stroppel, 2000: 115). Leaving aside the potential argument that the emotional manipulation is not specifically aimed at a woman in this example, Stroppel’s core concern here is that such a use of the Repetition exercise, ‘could be manipulative and contradictory to feminist concerns where ethics override the “successful” product at all costs’ (*ibid*). Fundamentally, she includes the proviso that the exercise *could* be harmful to feminist concerns, ‘when used in this manner’ (*ibid*). The simple answer to this critique of the Repetition exercise is that if used in a feminist company, it should not be used in this way. Secondly, rather than framing the actor as being a ‘victim’ of their emotions, it could be seen that it is freeing the traditionally ‘female’ realm of emotional experience of both men and women from the tyranny of the traditionally ‘male’ dimension of rational control. To step back from the specifics of this debate, however, it is enough for us to focus on the phrase, ‘when used in this manner’. What Stroppel clearly sees

as contradictory to feminist approaches in this example is the teacher whispering in her students' ear that their partner in the Repetition exercise is responsible for a terrible event coming to pass. This modification to the Repetition exercise is not an inherent feature of the exercise as I have described it from the records of Meisner's teaching and it is clearly the modification to the exercise that Stroppel finds objectionable and not the exercise itself.

This leads me to what may initially appear to be a controversial claim, that it is not the actor's function to make abstract moral judgements about the work in the moment of performance. There is nothing to prevent the actor from making such judgements and to evaluate potential and on-going projects in terms of these criteria, but such objective decisions are separate to, and in Meisner's method detrimental to, the practical work of moment-to-moment performance.

What clarifies this comment is my assertion that the Meisner Technique operates according to a subjective ethics that Levinas claims arises from 'face-to-face' encounters with The Other. Such a dynamic, through an endorsement of the absolute transcendence of The Other, is fundamentally ethical, though not in terms of objective frameworks of morality. In fact, to engage in objective moral judgements would require the actor to withdraw from this 'face-to-face' encounter and therefore impede the subjective ethics inherent to it. However, especially because the Meisner Technique requires the actor to not engage in objective and moral judgements in the moment of performance, it is imperative that outside of the moment of performance the actor ensure that the ethics and morality of the company align with their own. If this is done then the actor is free to engage in the subjective ethics of 'face-to-face' meeting without the fear of such manipulation as Stroppel identifies.

To return to the purpose of the Spoon River exercise and the way that Meisner introduces this to his students, we can see that he is offering them alternative tools to perform modern, realist texts, but rather than spelling out explicitly how and in which circumstances they should be applied, he teaches them to use the tools and thus orient themselves instinctively to the

ways they function. The aim here is not to educate actors, but to train them. This distinction does not mean that the Meisner Technique is unethical but, on the contrary, that it is inherently ethical according to Levinas' theories because it engages the actors' entire unity of perception and does not isolate their rational faculties as the sole arbiter of morality and behaviour.

The three conventions of modern, realist theatre that pose the largest challenge to the instinctual 'reality of doing' that Meisner's Technique fosters in his students are the unity of character that suggests an extension of a fictional reality beyond the moment and place of performance, the recitation of a pre-written text, and the representation of character. In this chapter we have shown how the character's unity is maintained through Emotional Preparation, a process that harnesses the actor's relationship with their environment that we analysed in Chapter One. We then discussed how the rote-learning of the pre-written texts of modern, realist theatre allows them to be integrated into the actors' awareness at the level of habitual action and that, according to Merleau-Ponty's analysis, this need not interfere with the actor's spontaneous reactions to their environment and their co-performers in the moment of performance. We then illustrated how a certain sequence of behaviour from the actor allows the audience to read a parallel, fictional sequence of behaviour from it and to interpret this as the actions of a fictional character. Meisner shows how the actor is able to construct the desired sequence of behaviour through the use of Stanislavsky's process of particularization. This allows the actor to substitute certain elements of their personal world for others and to develop a relationship with the world that best serves the realistic performance they are engaged in. Finally, in the most extreme challenge to the Meisner Technique, when the actor is limited strictly to the recitation of a text, they are able to bring their perspective together with that of the character they are supposed to represent through the Spoon River Exercise.

The above two routes for the Meisner actor to actualise scripts of modern, realist theatre give the impression of a straightforward methodology where either one approach or the other is applied to the particular script to be performed. However, as we have emphasised throughout this work, the Meisner Technique is not an objective, scientific procedure, but a process of perceptual orientation through which the students are led to engage with the world in particular ways. As a consequence, the application of the Technique to particular scripts does not follow a predefined formula in Meisner's classroom, but requires that the, 'human personalities [of Meisner and his students] interlock in the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: xvii). It is worth restating that this is the reason that the Meisner Technique includes the way the principles of the Technique are taught to students as much as the principles themselves, and it is this that leads to me to concentrate on the Technique as it was taught by Sanford Meisner rather than those teachers who have subsequently adapted his approach. The impression of the Technique given by Mel Gordon (2010), Elizabeth Stoppel (2000), and Larry Silverberg (1994) among others is of a collection of simple exercises that could be easily replicated by other teachers in isolation of their original context. However, as we have shown throughout this work, the exercises operate in a more holistic sense, engaging the actor's entire engagement with the world. When Mel Gordon and C.C. Courtney describe the acting modules of The Neighborhood Playhouse two-year programme as being split between the first year of 'building craft' and the second year of 'character work' (Gordon, 2010: 178), an impression of a logical, progressive methodology is reinforced, and what is more, it is implied that Meisner's rejection of the term 'character' from his actors' vocabulary is challenged (*ibid*). However, as we shall see now, when we discuss this phase of the Meisner Technique, especially as represented by the final pages of *Sanford Meisner On Acting*, the 'character' work builds directly upon the foundation that we have analysed in the first three chapters. Furthermore, while the term 'character' enters the discussion between Meisner and his students, it is employed in very particular ways that show us how the Technique is operating phenomenologically when it is applied to realist texts through textual interpretation

just as it does when it refines the relationships between the actor and their environment, other actors, and their actions. The difference between this stage of the Meisner Technique and the foundation that has preceded it is hinted at by the title of Chapter Twelve of *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, ‘Final Scenes: Instead of Merely The Truth’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 193, emphasis in original). This gives an indication that while the earlier stages of the Technique establish ‘truthful’ behaviour, here we see this behaviour being deployed within the constraints of modern, realist theatre. As this is a phenomenologically-aligned process, what I describe below is not a straight-forward formulaic approach but a series of approaches that are applied as the personalities and circumstances involved make appropriate.

The first step in the process of actualising a modern, realist script in Meisner’s classroom is to establish what can be discovered from the script. In each of the scenes discussed (from *Spring Awakening*, *A Palm Tree in a Rose Garden*, *Golden Boy*, *The Seagull*, and *Summer and Smoke*) Meisner discusses what the students can learn about the circumstances of their character from the play text. To begin with this discussion consists of Meisner asking the actors about the tangible facts of their characters’ lives that are given to them by the text. For instance, when talking to Wendy about her role of Barbara in *A Palm Tree in a Rose Garden*, Meisner asks,

“Wendy, why did you go to the party?”  
“I think I went there to get a job, an acting job,” Wendy says.  
“Ralph took you there to introduce you to a director who was going to give you a part. Did he talk to the director?”  
“Yes. He talked to Victor.”  
“Did you get the part?”  
“No.”

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 204-5)

Significantly this discussion of the character’s circumstances is framed in terms of the actor and their acting partner rather than the characters they are representing. For instance, he asks Wendy why *she* (and not Barbara) went to the party, and why *Ralph* (and not Charlie – the character’s name) took her there. We will return to this issue below, but the second thing to note about the exchange is that the facts that are brought up by the discussion are all things

that can be discovered directly from reading the play – there is very little imagination required at this stage of the textual analysis.

Once the facts about the character's circumstances that pertain directly to the scene in question have been established, Meisner moves the conversation to a more imaginative level where the actors are asked what they can deduce about their character from the facts they have established. This level of the discussion deals with situations that may not directly apply to the circumstances of the scene they are playing, but fill out the relationship their character has with the world, and therefore how they may behave in the scene. For example, when discussing Ray's role of Joe from *Golden Boy*, Meisner asks him,

*"If you go into a butcher shop and ask for a couple of pounds of lamb chops and the butcher seems to hear you but waits on two other people before you, how do you feel?"*

*"I want to reach over the counter and grab him by the tie and tell him not to ignore me!"*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 216)

Again the discussion is couched in terms of the actor themselves rather than the character as a separate entity. The second thing to note about this exchange is that the discussion is about an imaginary circumstance that is not a part of the scene or the play in question, but that clarifies the character's relationship with the world. The third significant feature of this exchange is that it is couched in the present tense – Meisner asks, 'how do you feel?' and Ray responds, 'I want to...' (ibid). This relates directly back to the dynamic of Emotional Preparation that we analysed earlier in this chapter. There we noted that one of the distinguishing features of this process is that it takes place in the present tense and involves imaginative daydreaming that relates to who the actor is in the present.

This last facet of the above exchange is especially significant because it shows us how Meisner applies the foundation that he has built up over the earlier stages of the training to the actualisation of realist texts through textual interpretation. What Meisner is effectively giving Ray in this instance is an impromptu emotional preparation, but this is not applied in the way

we saw in our discussion of the earlier exercises. Here it is used inside the classroom, and not immediately before the execution of the scene, but in order for the actor to bring their perspective closer to that of the character. This work of bringing the actor's perspective closer to that the character might be supposed to occupy is what we discussed in the Spoon River exercise where this is achieved through a succession of preparations and improvisations that include more and more elements of the text. This is a prime example of how the tools that Meisner has given his students are applied intuitively, in different combinations, and in different ways in order to achieve the desired performance. It is this way that the foundation that Meisner builds up with his early exercises is employed in the work with specific scripts, and therefore this work with texts from the modern, realist paradigm of theatre is not opposed to the phenomenological interpretation of the exercises that I have been presenting in this work.

There is a final phase of Meisner's work with scripts, in which he more directly applies the foundation that he has built up to the performance of the scenes, but before I discuss this it is necessary to address the use of the term 'character' in this process. As I note above, Meisner phrases all of his questions about the circumstances of the play in terms of the actor themselves rather than the character they are representing. However, there are moments when the word 'character' is used, and occasionally the characters are referred to as separate entities from the actors portraying them. An example of the first of these exceptions is when Meisner tells Ray that he has, 'something bordering on the character', in his scene from *Golden Boy*. In this instance Meisner is passing an objective judgement on the scene and telling Ray that the results of his work in terms of the modern, realist paradigm in which he is working is successful. Nothing that Meisner says here tells Ray that he is, or should be, working objectively, but it implies that the subjective processes he is engaging in are successful when viewed from an objective point of view.

Meisner talks about the character Anna is playing (Alma) from *Golden Boy* objectively at one point of his feedback about her work and this is potentially a more serious challenge to the interpretation that I have offered in this work. He tells her, 'Anna, this girl wants so many of the things that are associated with life, but she is constantly in conflict between her real wishes and her upbringing. I think that she's perpetually—I hate to use this word—*nostalgic* about being happy' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 235). This is clearly an example of Meisner talking to an actor about their character as something distinct from themselves. The reason for this departure from his usual approach is evident earlier in his feedback when he tells Joseph and Anna that they were able to achieve, 'a degree of reality which is commendable', but that they did not get to the point where every moment had a 'reason for being there' (*ibid*). In this way Joseph and Anna successfully displayed the 'reality of doing' that is the foundation of the Technique, but did not translate this sufficiently into the circumstances of the characters they are portraying. Because of this it is necessary for the actors to more fully grasp the situation of their characters that the play reveals before they continue their work. Once this has been done Meisner and the students revert to speaking about the circumstances of the play applying to them personally rather than to the characters they are portraying (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 237).

This example illustrates exactly how and when objective understanding is necessary in the application of the Meisner Technique to modern, realist texts – in order to fully understand the circumstances that the character they are portraying is subject to. Once this has been grasped through textual interpretation the actor works subjectively with the phenomenologically-aligned principles of the Technique. This is the fuller picture of Moseley's assertion that, 'Meisner never specifically rejected the idea of the 'character' as something which could exist outside of the moment' (Moseley, 2005: 126). Outside of the moment of performance the paradigm of modern, realist theatre demands that the actor understand the circumstances that the character they are portraying is subject to. This is necessary for the subjective work

that must then occur for the actor to draw their own perspective closer to that of the character in the moment of performance.

Now that the issue of character in the Meisner Technique has been addressed, we are able to discuss the final facet of the Meisner Technique's treatment of modern, realist texts. This aspect is the more direct application of the tools that Meisner has been teaching his students in the previous stages of the training. An example of this is Meisner's work with Mary on her Emotional Preparation for her role of Arkardina in Chekhov's *The Seagull*. After a discussion with Mary about the circumstances that she is subject to in the scene, he tells her to, 'Prepare much more—*much more*. Focus on the jealousy, Mary, and the desolation. I could go on, but go on yourself' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 227, emphasis in original). This refers to an Emotional Preparation in the standard sense that we described it earlier in this chapter and shows Meisner illustrating how a particular Preparation should be applied to a particular scene.

One other instance of Meisner applying the tools he has furnished his actors with directly to the performance of a scene is his work with Lila and Sarah on a scene from *Spring Awakening*. Meisner tells them that in order to release the emotional content of the scene, they, 'just have to get the canoe into that river' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 196). This refers to Meisner's earlier metaphor of the text as a canoe that floats on a river of the actor's emotion that he employed in reference to the Spoon River Exercise. To confirm this, in his next session with these students, Meisner gets them to both prepare first and tells them, 'If you remember any of the lines—if you can say them to each other—you can have a conversation. *If you remember. If you don't, that's okay too*' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 197, emphasis in original). This is a direct application of the Spoon River exercise, but with two actors instead of a solo performance. In this instance Lila and Sarah are able to bring their perspectives closer to those of the characters with this process rather than the more sequential method of rote-learning, preparation, and particularisation.

This discussion has shown how the phenomenologically-aligned principles that Meisner instils in his students in the earlier stages of the training are applied to scene work within a modern, realist paradigm of theatre. From this we can see that the ‘character’ work referred to by Silverberg and others is not opposed to the picture I have built up of Meisner’s early training, but that the demands of the script and the foundation they have built up must be brought together in the holistic way that we have seen the rest of the Technique operating. This is an interpretation of the Technique that is therefore applicable to all of the training, and not merely confined to its early stages.

This analysis of the application of Meisner’s Technique to modern, realist theatre is set against a shift in the underlying worldview within which it operates. We have shown here that Meisner’s Technique is operating according to phenomenologically-aligned imperatives that emphasize the actor’s subjective relationship with their world through perception and action. This is distinct from the objective, rational approach of psychological realism, and shows how Meisner was departing from the principles that governed such acting methodologies and creating a style of acting that would more correctly be categorized as phenomenological realism.

All of the stages of our analysis have shown how the instinctual foundation of ‘doing’ that Meisner has fostered in his students is harnessed to serve the particular demands that modern, realist theatre makes on them, and how those elements that might initially appear to be the largest challenges to Meisner’s Technique can be accommodated within it. It is in these ways that the phenomenal relationships we have been examining coalesce in the performance of modern, realist theatre. However, this discussion has also demonstrated that Meisner’s Technique and modern, realist theatre do not fit together as neatly as their historical coincidence might suggest. In the following chapter we shall see how these same relationships resonate strongly with particular preoccupations arising from the postmodern field.

# The Postmodern Field

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This work will demonstrate how Meisner's Technique participates in the paradigm of modern, realist theatre and simultaneously challenges this ideology with disruptive processes of the sort that postmodern performance instigates. It is my thesis that, while the Meisner Technique is historically part of the paradigm of modern, realist theatre, it operates according to a set of phenomenologically-aligned imperatives that create strong resonances with certain forms of postmodern performance. This establishes the dynamic wherein the Meisner Technique is able to enter into discourse with a sharply distinct paradigm of theatre/performance from the one it was operating within originally.

This chapter aims to set the scene for the three comparative analyses of the Meisner Technique and Foreman, Wilson, and Kirby that follow it. Firstly I will distinguish the Meisner Technique from Method Acting in general, and then trace the resonances that the Meisner Technique has with certain key figures of the postmodern art tradition who formed the backdrop against which Foreman, Wilson, and Kirby practiced. As I discuss below, the postmodern field indicates a collection of practices that are multiple and often sharply distinct from one another. What makes this chapter necessary for my argument is that it shows that Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson are not isolated examples of the resonances between the Meisner Technique and postmodern art/performance, but that there are very good reasons why these resonances should be apparent. This chapter does not seek to define a modernist movement towards progress in the postmodern field, but it is more enlightening to our discussion if we are able to bring a selection of features and aspects of this field into it.

A significant obstacle to discussing the Meisner Technique alongside postmodern performance is the fact that Meisner's Technique is often categorised as part of Method Acting by the considerable weight of academic discourse (Krasner, 2000a: 129). Often a prejudice against the versatility of Method Acting lurks in the subtext of academic writing, but some of the most significant places where it is explicitly stated include John Harrop's *Acting* (1991), Richard

Hornby's *The End of Acting* (1992), Colin Counsell's *Signs of Performance* (1996), and Charles Marowitz's *The Other Way* (1999). Of these, perhaps the most comprehensive argument is presented by John Harrop from a sociological perspective when he argues that, 'the major reason why only certain elements of Stanislavski's work were adopted in the United States and turned into the Method, was that they fitted certain needs of both American self-perception and the energies of the American theatre at a particular time' (Harrop, 1992: 39). Harrop proceeds from his analysis of the evolution of American self-perception to argue passionately that the 'detachment' of European theatre is inherently superior to the 'involvement' practiced in America. Taking up the argument made by Frank Wedekind against naturalistic acting, Harrop writes that, at its most extreme, 'Method Acting', 'is based upon the false premise that display of feeling is of supreme importance. It leads to momentary ego gratification of the MTV sensibility' (Harrop, 1992: 43). By illustrating through the coming pages that Meisner's branch of The Method is not inextricably linked to the modern, realist theatre of Twentieth Century America, we will open the possibility, prematurely closed by Harrop and others, that it can retrospectively be seen to have significant resonances with certain modes of postmodern performance. In fact, as I will argue in this and the following three chapters, Harrop's assessment of the success of Method traditions of acting as being partly due to the needs of American self-perception and the energies of American theatre at a particular time is also partly the reason that it *is* able to resonate with certain instances of postmodern performance. The outcome of this discussion will demonstrate that the Meisner Technique is relevant to two strikingly divergent paradigms of theatre/performance.

Both the Meisner Technique and certain instances of postmodern performance privilege the freedom of the individual over the significance of the social structures they are working within. Such an ideological hierarchy leads to a number of the specific features of the Meisner Technique that I will suggest resonate with instances of postmodern performance such as the reality of doing, the primacy of the present moment, and the importance of perspective. This cultural phenomenon that is common to both traditions is a significant factor in their

comparability. However, this work is focusing on the phenomenology of the actor that results from this sociological framework. It is very useful to note this overarching cultural situation, but my analyses are targeted on the phenomenological dynamic this creates rather than the broader causes of it.

The diversity of practice within the paradigm of postmodern performance is one issue that I must address in order to make my argument for Meisner's relevance beyond modern, realist theatre. Contemporary, non-realist performances, under the influence of developments in postmodern philosophies that shaped a considerable body of art and art theory through the second half of the Twentieth Century, often take as their 'foundation' and 'centre' the explicit groundlessness and de-centred perspectives of postmodernism and deconstructionism. Nick Kaye, in *Postmodernism and Performance*, writes that,

*one characteristic of the postmodern would be its resistance to any simple circumscription of its means and forms. As a disruption of 'foundation' or a striving toward foundation, this postmodernism is best thought of as an effect of particular strategies played out in response to certain expectations.*

(Kaye, 1994: 144, emphasis in original)

When a defining feature of a field of work is its flight from definition, we must turn our attention away from what is ungraspable to the observable effects this field has on the conventions that it destabilises.

In the last chapter we saw how Meisner adapts the 'foundation of acting' he builds up through the training in order to counter the challenges that modern, realist theatre confronts it with. This chapter sets out to show that many of the aspects of modern, realist theatre that contemporary performance calls into question are not inherently a part of Meisner's Technique, and furthermore that the processes Meisner incites in his students can facilitate the process of making some of the established conventions of modern, realist theatre suspect.

Although it should not be assumed from my argument that this subversion of modernist practices was the purpose of the Meisner Technique (and neither should it be assumed that

my argument relates to the intentions of Sanford Meisner himself), to ensure that my claims regarding this non-realist facet of the Meisner Technique are justified, it is sensible to take the words of Meisner, as the person who devised this technique, as our point of departure. It is worth restating that my use of Meisner's own opinions here is not evidence of a hidden modernist agenda, but an acknowledgement that the Technique itself is not entirely encompassed by the principles we are able to draw out of his teaching, but includes the way that he imparted these principles and the holistic phenomenological dynamic of his classroom.

In an interview with Paul Gray, Meisner said that, 'the essence of the Stanislavski approach,' that he claimed his Technique was true to, 'need not be changed for Brecht or any other non-naturalistic style' (Meisner in Gray, 1964: 150). While at first glimpse this might appear to be an attempt to erase the difference between modern, realist theatre and the diverse range of non-realistic forms of performance, careful attention to Meisner's language later in the same interview shows us his sensitivity to the divergence of these fields of performance and opens one route for his students to actualise non-realistic forms:

*The most important single element to me in Stanislavsky, as also in Sudakov and Rappaport, is the reality of doing. An actor whose craft is securely rooted in the ability to live truthfully, under the imaginary circumstances of the play can perform in any style. In no sense is the Stanislavski-trained actor limited to naturalism.*

(Meisner in Gray, 1964: 155)

This statement shows Meisner returning to two of his most often quoted principles, that 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing,' and that to act is to 'live truthfully under the imaginary circumstances'. The subtle modification he makes to the second of these principles here is that the actor should, 'live truthfully, under the imaginary circumstances of *the play*' (ibid, emphasis mine). It should be noted that Meisner does not say that the actor should live truthfully under the imaginary circumstances of the character, the fiction, or anything else that refers to the fictional narrative that is a prominent aspect of modern, realist theatre. By saying that the actor should live truthfully according to the 'imaginary circumstances of the play' he is including in this the conventions of the form as well as the content of the piece. Furthermore,

because Meisner is talking about what is not naturalism, he is invoking a vast field with no apparent outer boundaries, a field that bears a significant resemblance to postmodern performance that, 'resists any simple circumscription of its means and forms' (Kaye, 1994: 144). Because he is not more specific in defining the non-naturalistic forms he is discussing, he evokes the postmodern field that we are addressing in this chapter. By confining himself to the negative – by flying from any definition except that of the flight from definition – Meisner opens his argument up to the postmodern. Nowhere does Meisner prescribe just how the actor might 'live truthfully' according to the circumstances of non-naturalistic performance, and by not prescriptively fixing such a method and therefore resisting a closure of possibility he allows for the very diversity and un-decidability that we shall see is a feature of postmodern modes of performance.

The closest that Meisner comes to a direct instruction of how the actor might live truthfully according to non-realistic circumstances is for them to engage in the reality of doing. The reality of doing is precisely what we investigated in the first three chapters through the actor's perception of the world when performing according to the Meisner Technique. Chapter Four illustrated how this reality of doing can be made to serve modern, realist theatre, but rather than there being an inevitable connection between Meisner and realism, we found that this mode of performance posed a number of challenges to the foundation that Meisner had built up in the earlier stages of his training. However, whereas Meisner showed his students a range of techniques and processes to adapt their foundation of acting to the demands of modern, realist theatre, we are left to find the connections between Meisner's 'reality of doing' and non-realistic theatre ourselves. At its most basic, Meisner's Technique is a simple instruction to 'live truthfully' according to 'the imaginary circumstances.' I will now discuss the ways that Meisner's attempt to instil this in his students has strong resonances with the principles and preoccupations of certain modes of postmodern performance. It bears restating that Meisner was not training his students to actualise these postmodern forms of performance, but that retrospective critical comparison of Meisner and these conceptions of

performance might provoke a productive conversation. My reference to Meisner's remarks here are not an attempt to gain access to his intentions or any notion of authentic practice, but to show that the creator of the Meisner Technique was not working within a hermetically sealed environment of modern, realist theatre, but saw beyond it to those forms of performance that challenged its conventions. Because of this it is not unreasonable to conclude that the processes of the Meisner Technique (as distinct from Sanford Meisner's intentions) also take account of modes of performance beyond modern, realist theatre.

The three theatrical practitioners working within the field of postmodern performance whose processes I will compare with Meisner's Technique in the following chapters are Richard Foreman, Michael Kirby, and Robert Wilson. While these three practitioners created strikingly different aesthetics, each promoted particular processes and emphasised certain elements of performance and experience that Sanford Meisner also dwelled on in his training of actors for the vastly different paradigm of modern, realist theatre. The analysis that I am undertaking here is important because it breaks down some of the walls that stand between the discussion of these diverse modes of performance and therefore challenges some of the entrenched factionalism that is in evidence in such works as Harrop's *On Acting* and Charles Marowitz's *The Other Way*. However, to grasp the significance of these echoes across the distinct paradigms of theatre/performance, it is useful to lay out aspects of the broader discourse of postmodern art that contributed to the artistic environment in which Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson worked. The particular strands that I wish to draw from the tradition of postmodern art are John Cage's pursuit of non-intentionality and George Maciunas' manifesto of 'concretism' that was a part of the loose conglomeration of practices that fall under the umbrella of the Fluxus moment. Strikingly, although there is no direct influence or evidence of contact between Meisner and Cage or Maciunas, this critical comparison will show that certain aspects of their working processes echo and resonate with one another. This chapter therefore seeks to set out certain strands from the postmodern field that we can then draw upon in our discussion of particular practitioners in the following chapters.

Indeterminacy was introduced as a leading concern of the post-war avant-garde in The United States by John Cage who emphasised the intrusion of chance into the controlled performance environments of modernist practitioners. Cage was led to apply processes that would introduce chance and indeterminacy into his work by his pursuit of the non-intentionality and 'no-mind' advocated by the Zen Buddhism he practiced (Schmitt, 1990: 13-14). Randomness had previously been highlighted by earlier waves of the avant-garde (such as the Dada performers of the early Twentieth Century (Perloff, 1999: vii)), but John Cage's work is cited as a direct influence on The Happenings of the 1960s and the Fluxus movement of the 1960s and 70s, and neatly presaged Roland Barthes', 'Death of the Author' (1967), and Jean-François Lyotard's, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) (Kirby, 1995: 24). By abdicating the authority of the omnipotent creator and delegating control of the performance event to chance, Cage was initiating what became a central feature of the late Twentieth Century avant-garde – the challenge to the authorial power of the writer (Lampe, 2002: 292). I will return to the wider challenge to the author/creator that the Meisner Technique is able to mount later in this chapter, but will first focus on the specific role that indeterminacy plays in this process.

Natalie Crohn-Schmitt in her work, *Actors and Onlookers*, makes the connection between the parallel developments of scientific outlooks on the world and the changing preoccupations of theatrical practice. She ties Stanislavsky's System and the American Method that grew out of it to an Aristotelian worldview and Cage's experimental music, and the performance that it partly inspired, to the developments of quantum physics in the Twentieth Century. She shows how the systematic approach that Stanislavsky pioneered in Western theatre relies on the principle of cause and effect and a sharp distinction between subject and object (Schmitt, 1990: 104). It should be noted here that the picture Schmitt presents of Stanislavsky's System simplifies the real complexities of his legacy. The breadth of the argument that Schmitt constructs requires her to treat Stanislavsky as being inextricably bound to realism, or what she calls, 'traditional theatre.' She writes that, 'Stanislavsky's acting techniques depend on a world view comparable to that in the traditional theater – for which they were in fact

designed' (Schmitt, 1990: 93). She notes that this was appropriate to the particular works The System aimed to produce, where the actors aimed to convey the meaning intended by the author directly to an audience (*ibid*). For a perspective that balances this interpretation and gives sufficient weight to Stanislavsky's later work with yoga and Molière in particular, Sharon Carnicke's 2009, *Stanislavsky in Focus* is particularly useful. Carnicke also provides compelling reasons why certain elements of Stanislavsky's System have been overlooked by both Russian and Western traditions of acting (Carnicke, 2009: 183).

In contrast to Schmitt's representation of Stanislavsky's System as being inherently of the modern realist paradigm, she argues that Cage, under the influence of Zen philosophy, directly aligned himself with the model of uncertainty and indeterminacy that also arose in quantum physics during the Twentieth Century. As such, she implies a model of paradigmatic dominance and rupture where the Stanislavskian model holds sway until the 'Cagean' ideology attacks and displaces it. Such a model of successive revolution is opposed to my argument that certain continuities of practice survive such ideological shifts. It is this continuity of practice that allows the Meisner Technique, which was historically contingent with modern realist theatre, to have strong resonances with certain modes of postmodern performance. This continuity of practice does not mean that there is any direct contact or transmission between the two traditions but that there is a basis for them to be compared and that such a comparison might illuminate aspects of each in unique ways. These connections between the distinct ideological paradigms ultimately introduce shades of grey into the black and white certainties that models of ideological dominance, rupture and revolution imply.

Schmitt's work provides many intriguing insights, but because she uses specific case studies to suggest broader trends that may be at work, her arguments tend to the positivist. The risk of this 'key-hole' methodology, while allowing her the space to look at each case in great depth, is that it might ignore the grey area of transition in favour of the black and white divisions between discrete moments of history. Even though Schmitt is applying a 'field concept'

(Schmitt, 1990: 21) to each paradigm, by presenting a succession of such distinct perspectives she runs the risk of falling back into an Aristotelian view, or a substance-based empirical view. We have already seen Schmitt presenting a simplified interpretation of Stanislavsky's System in order to construct her arguments from this perspective. This should not be taken as a dismissal of Schmitt's project, only that a second approach might add further light and shade to the arguments that she presents and readmit some of the complexity her methodology forces her to exclude.

Similarly to the 'complementarity' Schmitt identifies between theories of General Relativity and Quantum Physics (Schmitt, 1990: 10), I propose that my approach of examining the variety of elements within a single methodology, that enables me to look synchronically at a particular acting method, is complimentary to her diachronic examination of different methods successively. While Schmitt's book leaves the impression of a modernist movement toward progress, my discussion aims to present a field-view of an acting method where elements of both what she depicts as the Aristotelian-based Stanislavskian approach to theatre and the Heisenbergean-aligned Cagean approach to performance can be seen to co-exist. Both perspectives have valid insights to offer, and while they may not fit neatly together into a unified model, they 'compliment' each other by each allowing us to more firmly come to grips with different aspects of theatre/performance.

In order to make her arguments about Stanislavsky's practice applicable to a wider range of theatre (and particularly American theatre) from the Twentieth Century, Schmitt emphasises the strong connections between Stanislavsky's System and Method Acting. To support this link she cites Robert Lewis, the co-founder of The Actor's Studio, the home of Strasberg's Method, who calls Stanislavsky's published work 'the Bible' for actors (Lewis in Schmitt, 1990: 93). However, she underestimates the difference between Stanislavsky's System and Strasberg's Method when she writes that, 'by 1945 "the Method," as Stanislavski's system of acting was known in the United States, was triumphant, and remained so into the mid-sixties...' (*ibid*).

This statement reaffirms the misapprehension, encouraged by Strasberg, that ‘the Method’ is a faithful and direct translation of Stanislavsky’s system. The second area of complexity that Schmitt glosses over is that ‘The Method’ is not a single unified approach to theatre, but rather a range of acting methodologies, the most prominent of which is Strasberg’s Method, but also including the techniques taught by Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner (Krasner, 2000a: 129). By seeking to address a wide range of divergent methodologies in one coherent theoretical model, Schmitt necessarily minimises the differences between them and does not dwell on the conflicting elements they include. In order to show that Meisner’s branch of ‘The Method’ is relevant to, and able to enter into a productive dialogue with, certain modes of postmodern performance that John Cage’s experimental music partly inspired, I will first separate out three distinct acting processes that Schmitt conflates into her picture of ‘the Method’: Stanislavsky’s System, Strasberg’s Method, and Meisner’s Technique. Once Meisner’s Technique is freed from the baggage of the two preceding methodologies the startling synergies it has with Cage’s work, the ‘concretist’ Fluxus artists of the late 1960s and 1970s, and ultimately, within the world of performance practice, with Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson, can be brought into focus.

Schmitt identifies a scientific tendency of Stanislavsky’s work in his attempt to systematize the craft of acting. Although she notes that Stanislavsky is never able to achieve a fully coherent and logical system, she claims that he set out to create a science of acting that could be universally applied to any performance an actor might have to give. The faith in the scientific validity of Stanislavsky’s work is still present in the late Twentieth Century, and a good representation of this belief is Sonia Moore’s argument for the universality of Stanislavsky’s System. Moore says that,

*Since the rules developed by Stanislavsky are based on objective natural laws, they can never be outdated. It is also obvious that the System is not a Russian phenomenon. The laws of nature are universal – the same for all people, in all countries, and in all times. Therefore, the rules developed by Stanislavsky are obligatory for all actors.*

(Moore in Schmitt, 1990: 94)

As Schmitt notes, this paradigm of acting takes on the authorial power of an unchallengeable ‘truth’, that aligns with the logical positivist approach of science. Embedded within Stanislavsky’s System is the dualist subject-object distinction, which he retains, ‘by explaining that the actor is experientially divided into two persons, one the character, the other the actor-observer who never loses his self-possession’ (Schmitt, 1990: 93). Fundamentally, she notes that this relationship between actor and character sets up a heavily mediated connection between the actor, their actual environment, and the other people that they encounter in it. She observes that according to Stanislavsky’s approach, ‘Each actor should relate directly only to his or her character, and through that character to other characters, and hence, indirectly, to other actors’ (Schmitt, 1990: 107). She also makes the observation that Stanislavsky’s System of acting was suited to the particular type of theatre that it was designed to serve, but because of this it is inevitably tied to modernist naturalism, and ‘essentially antithetical’ to ‘new theater’ (Schmitt, 1990: 93). As we have noted earlier, this minimises Stanislavsky’s later work with yoga, melodrama, and Moliere.

By claiming that the Method is merely what Stanislavsky’s System became called in the United States, Schmitt misses the crucial alterations Strasberg made when he (mis)interpreted Stanislavsky. Just as Stanislavsky was working within the logical positivist framework when he attempted to construct a universal science of acting, Strasberg was working within a different phase of the scientific dominance of perception. By the 1930s Freud’s theories of the psychology of the individual had taken hold of the popular imagination (Freud, 1935: 102-3), and so the interest in the internal workings of the character, that had thus far had its fullest exploration in Stanislavsky’s work at the MAT, were taken to a new level (Styan, 1983: 259). Strasberg’s obsession with ‘real emotion’ meant that the internal workings of the character as embodied by the actor became his chief interest. In his memoir, Harold Clurman evokes the cult-like reverence Strasberg had for it:

*Strasberg was a fanatic on the subject of true emotion. Everything was secondary to it. He sought it with the patience of an inquisitor, he was outraged by trick substitutes, and when he had succeeded in stimulating it, he husbanded it, fed it, and protected it. Here was something new to most of the actors, something basic, something almost holy. It was revelation in the theatre; and Strasberg was its prophet.*

(Clurman, 1957: 41)

It is this focus that probably offends Harrop to the extent that he claims that, in its extreme, Method Acting, ‘is based upon the false premise that display of feeling is of supreme importance. It leads to momentary ego gratification of the MTV sensibility’ (Harrop, 1992: 43). Such a focus on the particular psychology of character and actor led to a cult of personality where a number of stars dominated public awareness of the actor’s craft, and the personality of the actor gradually overcame the centrality of the character (Vineberg, 1991: 92-3). I will not return to an exhaustive discussion of the ways that Strasberg’s Method (mis)interpreted Stanislavsky’s System as it has already been thoroughly discussed in Pitches’ *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition* (2006) and Carnicke’s *Stanislavsky in Focus* (2009) among others, and briefly outlined in the introduction of this work.

Meisner, similarly to Strasberg, developed his Technique in an era in which the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud were in ascendancy in the public consciousness. The effect of this on the Meisner Technique is apparent through the number of references he makes to him when teaching (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 81, 84-6, 96, 102-3, 114, 119, 123-4, 134-5, 159-60). Neither are references to Freud confined to this one source, but also occur in Nick Doob’s 1985 documentary on Meisner’s teaching and the 2006 DVD release of *Masterclass* by the Sanford Meisner Centre (see minute 46 of this for an example of Freud’s impact on the Meisner Technique).

Meisner’s admiration for Freud’s theory of the artist achieving through their fantasy what they could previously only attain in their fantasy (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 135) shows that Meisner did not completely reject Freud’s outlook and that Freud’s theories therefore have an effect on the Meisner Technique. What Pitches correctly identifies as Meisner’s rejection of

the ‘mechanics of Freud’ (Pitches, 2006: 125) refers to the difference in the influence that Freud has on the Meisner Technique as opposed to Strasberg’s Method. While Pitches suggests that Meisner moved towards the Behaviourism of Watson (*ibid*), I have shown through my analyses in the previous chapters that the processes of the Meisner Technique are more closely aligned to phenomenological views of the world. While the Behaviourism of Watson taps into the empirical level of the instructions Meisner gives his students, it is at the level of the actor’s holistic experience of their environment, other people, and their actions that these Behaviourist instructions take root and produce the behaviour intended. For example, Meisner tells his students to fix their attention on their partner’s behaviour, but only to access impulses that are a product of their whole phenomenological being-in-the-world. Where Watson discusses behaviour in terms of stimulus and response, the more humanistic picture Meisner paints of this, while possible to discuss in Watsonian terms, fits more comfortably with, and can therefore be analysed more fully from, a phenomenological point of view.

I contend that the particular influence that Freud has on the Meisner Technique is also a feature of its cultural location that allows it to resonate across diverse paradigms of theatre/performance. The feature of Freud that Meisner latches on to is the potential for the individual to be liberated from socially-imposed constraint. In Freud this is evidenced by his quest to uncover and resolve neuroses in his patients. Meisner can be seen to be identifying with this process in his frustration at the repressed impulses of his students. For example, when Meisner is addressing one of his students’ nervousness, without any prompting, he blames it on his parents (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 160). Perhaps more telling is an exchange between himself and Joseph:

*Joseph says, “You’re allowed to do things onstage that you don’t do in real life. You’re permitted to express yourself on stage and don’t need to hold yourself back as you must in life.”*

*“What does it mean, ‘to hold yourself back?’”*

*“To censor yourself. Society sets the standard, but that has nothing to do with acting.”*

(Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 162)

The collected weight of this evidence shows that Meisner did align his Technique with the liberation of the individual that he derived from Freud. So while Meisner moved away from the psychoanalytic techniques that Strasberg employed in exercises such as Emotion Memory to the Behaviourist instructions that led his students to a particular phenomenological awareness, he did uphold the spirit of Freud's quest to liberate the individual.

This quest for the liberation of the individual resonates across a vast swathe of American art and literature and is encapsulated in 'The American Dream'. We shall see how this culturally entrenched ideology that the Meisner Technique is operating in alignment with provides some common ground between it and the work of certain postmodern practitioners that allow discourses to begin between them. However, it is not enough to say that this cultural ideology is the only thing that the Meisner Technique shares with these practitioners, but this is an important commonality that contributes to the dynamic of discourse between them. This discourse is not limited to the cultural dimension, but permeates a number of aspects of their work and suggests interesting connections between them despite the divergent paradigms of theatre/performance they are participating in.

To begin establishing the ground for this discourse I will draw out Schmitt's portrayal of John Cage's links to indeterminacy and the way that he provided a foundation for the postmodern 'New Theater' that followed it. Under the influence of Eastern philosophies, John Cage gave a significant role to chance and indeterminacy in his musical performances; the specific dimension of Zen philosophy that is observable in Cage's work is the minimization of human intentionality. Cage distinguishes between 'chance' and 'indeterminacy' by defining chance as the random arrangement of a set range of elements, whilst indeterminacy indicates the random arrangement of a random selection of elements. Schmitt notes that owing to the wider range of potential outcomes, and especially of purportedly unknowable outcomes, Cage prefers indeterminacy to chance (Schmitt, 1990: 12). David Nicholls observes that Cage's

adaption of the *I-Ching* in the third movement of his *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra* represents, ‘his final step away from choice and into the world of chance’ (Nicholls, 2007: 52). A piece where Cage further reduced the impact of his own intentions on his work by moving from chance into indeterminacy is *Songbooks*, where he used *I-Ching* chance operations to determine both the mode of performance and the ‘basic compositional method’ of each section of the piece (Nicholls, 2007: 90). As I note above, the pursuit of indeterminacy is one facet of a wider challenge to the authority of the author/creator that runs through avant-garde performance of the post-World War II era. However, as Schmitt recognises, this is paralleled in the scientific world by the growing awareness of a discontinuous existence at the heart of the quantum universe where the laws of cause and effect as understood through linear time do not operate. In this environment, ‘matter and space are inseparable and interdependent parts of a single whole – the field’ (Schmitt, 1990: 21).

As we shall see in the coming pages, indeterminacy is a significant element of Meisner’s Technique. Just as Cage sought out indeterminacy in order to pursue those things he was interested in (the non-intentionality advocated by Zen Buddhism) and in so doing brought his work into parallel with contemporary physics, Meisner embraced indeterminacy and chance in order to pursue the aspect of theatre that he was interested in – the spontaneous behaviour of the actor resulting from a direct engagement with the world they perceive. It is necessary to restate here that Meisner and Cage were working within different paradigms of art and according to divergent worldviews. However, by the fact that they both worked towards indeterminacy, we can identify one aspect of their respective practices that might be brought into discourse with one another. The first way that the Meisner Technique introduces indeterminacy into the acting process is by prioritising the spontaneous and instinctive human reactions of the actor to their environment above the recitation of a pre-determined script, a system of beliefs that leads Meisner to tell his students that, ‘The text is your greatest enemy’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 137), and, ‘nobody, not even the playwright, can determine how a life is going to live itself out sensitively, instinctively, on the stage’ (Meisner and Longwell,

1987: 191). It could therefore be that it is only because of the ascendancy of the author in modern, realist theatre that Meisner tells his students that they must craft their performance so that it supports the overall intentions of the author (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 140). If this requirement were to be removed, as it sometimes is in avant-garde performance in the second half of the Twentieth Century, the actor would be free to respond to their real environment, including any chance elements within it.

Schmitt notes the shift ‘from pretend to actual’ is represented by the rise of improvising ensembles in the Twentieth Century and takes Viola Spolin’s instruction to the actor to, ‘reflect what you see, not what you think you see’ as representative of this viewpoint (Spolin in Schmitt, 1990: 117). The ‘most successful’ inclusion of chance in theatrical performance that Schmitt is aware of is executed by the improvisational collective, *At the Foot of the Mountain* by encouraging audience members to interject during their performance and then allowing the actors the freedom to respond to these interruptions. In this example of ‘New Theater’, we see an emphasis on chance, in an echo of Cage, combined with a shift from the pretend to the actual as Spolin prescribed, both of which we have seen are latent in Meisner’s Technique.

The state that Meisner encourages his students to enter is similar to that John Cage evokes in the audience – a heightened awareness of the real environment around them. For example, Cormac Power in his 2008 book *Presence in Play* notes that if audience members found performances of 4'33", ‘unsatisfying’, that, ‘for Cage that is only because of a refusal to “be” in the present and to open oneself to the richness of everyday phenomena’ (Power, 2008: 92). This shift from the pretend to the actual that Meisner stresses by claiming that ‘The foundation of acting is the reality of doing’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 16), resonates even more strongly with the concretist Fluxus artists of the late-1960s and early-1970s, and is taken in different directions by some New Theatre practitioners, such as Kirby, Wilson, and Foreman. I argue that this emphasis on the actual over the pretend is built upon the pursuit of indeterminacy that John Cage advocated, and will therefore return to an examination of these

connections once I have explored the phenomenal basis for indeterminacy in Meisner's Technique. However, despite the connection between these practitioners on the issue of indeterminacy it should not be assumed that indeterminacy would mean the same thing to each of them. For example, for Cage this is rooted in Zen Buddhist motivations and for Meisner it relates to spontaneous behaviour stemming from the actor's engagement with the world as we shall see below. However, the very fact that indeterminacy of one sort or another exists within both practices means that they can be brought into discourse with one another.

In Chapter One I divided the actors' observation of the environment into their encounter with their immediate concrete environment, the instinctual, emotional environment, and the abstract environment. We can now see that the phenomenologies of these encounters tend to favour chance over determinacy. In the actor's observation of the immediate concrete environment we noted that according to many phenomenologists, beginning with Husserl, a vital but often overlooked part of the act of observation is that it must be done from somewhere, what Husserl called the 'zero-point' of orientation (Husserl, 1989: §18). This is a crucial departure from the rational, scientific view of the world that constructs an imagined objective perspective that has no zero-point. In a scientific view of the world, through which we can determine facts and truths about the world, no single point in space is taken as the point from which the world is viewed, and thus the human significances of the world are stripped away (Husserl, 1970: 32). From a phenomenological angle, the importance of perspective for implicating the place from which the world is observed means that a final, authoritative truth of the sort that science asserts is impossible. If an objective truth is impossible, then everything can only be determined from a certain perspective and any ultimate truth claims dissolve as knowledge of the world can only be established relative to a particular person. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty dismisses the idea of 'truth' in favour of 'the real' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 16).

This means that objects in the immediate concrete perception of the actor do not appear as true (which would require them to be logically possible or necessary), but as ‘real’ which means that the actor ‘receives’ these objects as ‘the infinite sum of an indefinite series of perspectival views’, in none of which the object is received in its entirety (*ibid*). When grasping an object in this way, it is impossible to establish a single authoritative truth about it. Furthermore because of the infinite number of potential perspectives from which the actor could be operating, it could never be exactly prescribed how the actor will encounter any object. Because the Meisner Technique requires the actor to base their performance on their real reactions to the world they encounter through action, their performance is subject to variation and cannot be wholly determined.

The second way that an element of chance or indeterminacy enters the Meisner actor’s performance through their relationship with their immediate concrete environment is through the very acts of their perception they perform. The phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty is removed from the transcendental variety practiced by Husserl, and operates from an existential standpoint. Because of this, Merleau-Ponty, following on from Heidegger, makes it clear that human beings grasp the world around them through a collection of potential motor projects that radiate out from them to the objects they perceive (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 5). He even goes so far as to say that the perception of these objects is itself such a motor project, so that when an actor listens to the number of cars passing outside the classroom in Meisner’s observation exercises, they are acting in the world. Because the results of a motor project cannot be determined until that motor project is completed, an actor cannot know what they will perceive in the moment of performance until they execute that perception. Although, as we saw in Chapter Four the actor can craft their performance and control their environment to some extent in order to fulfil the requirement of modern, realist theatre that their actions should remain faithful to the detail and spirit of a predetermined script, this need not happen outside of the conventions of this mode of performance. The environment the actor enters might be deliberately altered so that they do not perceive what they expect to perceive.

Alternatively, the environment that the actor enters may be deliberately illusory or misleading, encouraging them to have a ‘false’ perception (in which they perceive something that they later perceive, or that the audience simultaneously perceives, as something else).

A practical example that generates such manipulation of the actor’s perception is The Endowment Game described by Keith Johnstone. In this performance game one actor enters the playing space and attempts to guess from the clues given to them by their fellow actors certain fictional features about themselves that have been decided by the audience in their absence (Johnstone, 1999: 185-6). Although in this example the actors giving the clues are attempting to communicate effectively rather than mislead their fellow actor, the intended comedy of the scene arises from the actor’s misperception of the clues given to them while the audience know the ‘correct’ answer. This variation of dramatic irony where it is the actor and not the character who does not know something that the audience does, arises from the way the scene is constructed and thus the manipulation of the actor’s perception is built into its dynamic. Because the features the actor has to guess are selected by the audience, they are outside the actor’s control. Similarly, the reaction of the actor is outside of the control of both the audience and the other actors. It follows from these dynamics that there is an element of un-decidedness about the actor’s perception from which they build their performance. Because of the shift from the ‘pretend to the actual’ that Meisner’s Technique and the improv of Johnstone and Spolin initiates, we can see that if the Meisner actor were put in such a situation where the conventions of modern, realist theatre are removed, the indeterminacy of the relationships the Meisner actor has with the world is revealed. Whereas the modern, realist conventions are imposed as external forces acting on the operation of Meisner’s acting method, the presence of indeterminacy within it is an inherent feature of it. This would suggest that rather than being inextricably bound to naturalist-inspired, modern, realist theatre, the Meisner Technique contains processes that can be compared with those of certain postmodern practitioners.

Meisner's rejection of the rational, scientific worldview comes closer to the surface when we turn to our analysis of the instinctive, emotional environment. When leading his students through the Repetition exercise, Meisner tells them to be 'foolish' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 47). As we noted in Chapter One, this is part of his challenge to an 'intellectual' style of acting and his attempt to get rid of, 'all that "head" work' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 36). Throughout Meisner's teaching he regularly opposes his own, 'instinctive' acting method to 'intellectual' approaches. He emphasises this in a conversation with his assistant where he claims to be, 'a very non-intellectual teacher of acting. My approach is based on bringing the actor back to his [sic] emotional impulses and to acting that is firmly rooted in the instinctive' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 37).

As we noted in Chapter One, the instinctive basis of the Meisner Technique means that it utilises the whole 'intentional arc' of the performer that comprises both their physical environment and the emotional dimension of this environment. In Chapter Three where we discussed the Independent Activity exercise, we saw how by finding a 'reason why' the actor is able to deliberately shift their relationship with their environment and thereby alter their behaviour. Although this process is done deliberately and consciously in order to produce a certain sequence of behaviour, the very connection between the physical environment and the emotional dimension of this through the actor's unity of perception means that the outcome of their perception is indeterminate. To signal the difficulty of controlling the emotional dimension of performance, Meisner calls it, 'the most subtle problem in acting' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 74). However, he was most explicit about the difficulty of the actors' deliberate manipulation of their emotions when he said in interview, 'Emotion, without which a performance can be effective but not affective, is a most elusive element. It works best when it is permitted to come into play spontaneously, and has a perverse inclination to slither away when consciously wooed' (Meisner in Gray, 1964: 144).

Because the effect of the actor's manipulation of their perception arises in the moment of performance the result of the process cannot be predicted. The unity of perception means that neither the physical world nor the emotional dimension can stand alone and provide determinate facts that could lead to a pre-determined sequence of behaviour. The interconnectedness of the physical and the emotional dimensions of the environment means that neither exists in any fixed form, but rather in a state of flux where, by focusing on one dimension, the actor will affect both what is being examined, and the elements that this connects to. Therefore, when the actor selects and manipulates their 'reason why', their perception of the physical environment will change in response. What once formed part of the background of their perception may become the figure, and what may have been the figure could slip into the background. Because the behaviour of the Meisner actor results directly from their perception and is therefore perpetually unfolding, it never forms a stable picture that can be measured and determined in a scientific way. Because of the unity of perception, the Meisner Technique's basis in the instinctive as opposed to the intellectual therefore results in an unpredictable performance.

This indeterminacy is further emphasised through the conscious introduction of abstract elements into the actor's perception by the Independent Activities exercise that we will discuss in greater detail below. By consciously interweaving a real physical action with the abstract element of an urgent reason why, the actor is explicitly embracing the interplay of physical and emotional dimensions that is expressed by Meisner as an 'instinctive' approach. As we shall see later in this chapter, these features play into Meisner's key principle, that, 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing', a principle that resonates with the 'concretist' Fluxus artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s and, in the following chapters, with certain 'New Theatre' practitioners, such as Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson. Because indeterminacy can now be seen to lie at the heart of, 'the reality of doing', not only can we detect the echoes of Meisner's process in the work of Cage, the 'concretists', Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson, we can see the connections between Cage and the other postmodern artists and performers from a new

perspective. This is one way that this study of Meisner's process across the paradigms of modern, realist theatre and postmodern performance can yield fresh insights – by providing a new lens through which to examine those practices that Meisner's Technique resonates with.

Meisner also embraces the possibility of chance occurrence in his acting technique through the inter-personal dynamic he fosters in his classroom. The prime model for this dynamic is the Repetition exercise that we discussed in Chapter Two. We saw there that, from a range of perspectives, it is the frisson created by one actor's encounter with another that creates a self-sustaining chain of reactions. From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, encountering another person, 'offers ... the task of true communication' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 18). However, because in the Repetition exercise the actor is required to say what they notice about the other person, communication becomes a continual and futile attempt to catch up to the perspective that the other person occupies. Because in this exercise the encounter between two people is not controlled by either participant but by the play between them, no one can determine how it will progress – it is indeterminate. This uncertainty aligns Meisner's Technique with Cagean indeterminacy and shows the discourse that is possible between Meisner and postmodern performance. Of course, indeterminacy is still different for each practitioner, but indeterminacy is still present in one form or another in both practices.

From Levinas' more transcendental perspective, the Repetition exercise is a source of unlimited indeterminacy. The dynamic of discourse (as opposed to the communication that Merleau-Ponty proposes) allows for an ethical rather than an existential encounter. Because The Other cannot be totalised in face-to-face meeting, their behaviour reveals them as a constantly unfolding entity to their acting partner. By bringing the alterity and transcendence of The Other to the foreground of their perception and using this as the cause of their own behaviour, the Meisner actor repeatedly destabilises their own identity and removes the possibility of fixing themselves as *being* a stable entity. This uncertainty reduces the ability of the actor to predict their own actions or behaviour and therefore means that neither actor is

in control of the encounter, thus making it susceptible to uncertainty and indeterminacy. In the Meisner Technique, the Repetition exercise becomes a model for the encounter between actors in performance and therefore it is this process of unpredictable, impulsive shifting perspectives and identity that defines the performances it produces. We saw in the previous chapter the lengths to which Meisner has to go to make this dynamic serve the determinate structure of modern, realist drama, but when such requirements are removed the inter-subjective relationship fostered by Meisner's training can be a source of indeterminacy of the sort that certain instances of postmodern performance foster.

Meisner also incorporates chance within his acting technique through the actors' engagement in the 'reality of doing' through The Independent Activity exercise. We saw in Chapter Three that the four criteria of The Independent Activity exercise (that the actor have some skill for performing their activity, a reason why they need to do it, and that it be difficult and urgent) had the combined effect of making the actor withdraw from the pre-established circuits through which they relate to their fellow actor and therefore interact with them more spontaneously. This effectively amounts to a loss of pre-planned control over the way the exercise develops and therefore increases the indeterminacy it admits. By encouraging his actors to lose rational control of themselves and their actions, Meisner also ensures that the performer does not simply replace the playwright as the 'author' of the performance. Instead the actor lives through the performance and yields the power to interpret it to the audience. Of course, it should be remembered that within the modern, realist paradigm of performance the 'freedom' of the audience to interpret the performance is circumscribed by a multiplicity of other factors such as the play text being performed, the architecture of the theatre and the set design, reviews of the production/play and other secondary literature, and the reactions of the other audience members. However, when applied beyond this paradigm of theatre, such factors do not necessarily apply in the same way. Once more we see that when the constraints of modern, realist theatre are removed from the Meisner actor, they no longer have to craft their performance according to the intentions of a playwright, but are free to explore less

tightly prescribed scores that might take their inspiration from themes, motifs, or simple instructions as opposed to actualising a realistic script.

John Cage's pursuit of indeterminacy that has its roots in his Zen Buddhist beliefs was not taken up wholesale by many of the artists that followed him. However, Cage's influence can be seen in the work of the Fluxus artists of the late-1960s and early-1970s. A leading figure from this movement, Nam June Paik, despite claiming to have moved to America solely because of John Cage (Paik in Ross, 1993: 59), took issue with this core tenet of Cage's work. He objects to the Western interpretation of Zen by arguing, 'Zen is responsible for Asian poverty. How can I justify ZEN without justifying Asian poverty?' (Paik in Blom, 1998: 79). Rather than seeking indeterminacy on spiritual grounds, Paik and other Fluxus artists in the late-1960s and early-1970s worked in ways that were compatible with 'concretism' as distilled by George Maciunas in his 1965 article, 'Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art' (Maciunas, 1965: 192-195). In this article Maciunas opposes 'concretist' to 'illusionist' artists on three specific criteria: Firstly, Maciunas claims that the 'concretist' prefers unity of form and content to their separation, attempting to get closer to presentation rather than representation; Secondly, the 'concretist' prefers indeterminacy and improvisation to complete the form of a work rather than human predetermination; Thirdly, the 'concretist' rejects artistic method and purpose in favour of reality and approaches art-nihilism, anti-art, and nature (Maciunas, 1965: 192-195). The resonance between Meisner and these 'concretist' Fluxus principles is striking and can be best grasped through an exploration of Meisner's key axiom, 'The foundation of acting is the reality of doing' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 16).

Meisner meets Maciunas' first condition by telling his students that they must never pretend to do anything, but really perform actions on stage. By commanding his students, 'Don't act, don't fake, don't pretend-work!' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 55), Meisner is telling them that they should not pretend to be something that they are not, and they should not pretend to have any emotions that they are not experiencing, but that they should really do things on

stage. As one of his students summarises for him, ‘When you do something you really *do* it rather than pretend that you’re doing it’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 24, emphasis in original). This could be read as adhering to Maciunas’ first principle of ‘concretist’ art, that, ‘Concretists in contrast to illusionists prefer unity of form and content, rather than their separation’ (Maciunas, 1965: 192-195). Rather than asking his students to pretend to be something they are not, and thus create the illusion that the piece’s form is separate from its content, he is asking them to ‘really *do*’ their actions and therefore bring the form and content of their work closer together.

This principle manifests itself in the work of Fluxus artists through a concern with the material circumstances of performance. For example, the modifications made to the ‘prepared instruments’ of the ‘concretist’ Fluxus artists emphasise their materiality, taking the sounds they produce away from abstract musical notes and closer to the actual material conditions of the sound’s production. In doing this, the artist brings the form and the content of their performance closer together in the way that Maciunas’ first principle of ‘concretism’ suggests. Paik took a further step in this direction in his work, *One for Violin Solo*, in which the actual materiality of the violin is emphasised by its destruction. In this performance, the destruction of the violin is not pretended, represented, or suggested to the audience, but is really done. The non-repeatability of this act of destruction emphasises the reality of the action. This emphasis calls the ‘re’ of ‘representation’ into question, showing that through a unification of the form and content of the performance the artist moves further from pretend and towards ‘the actual’. These examples show how Meisner’s Technique and the work of ‘concretist’ Fluxus artists cohere around Maciunas’ principle of the unity of form and content.

Maciunas’ second axiom that, ‘a truer concretist rejects pre-determination of final form in order to perceive the reality of nature, the course of which, like that of man himself [sic] is largely indeterminate and unpredictable’ (Maciunas, 1965: 192-195). This rejection of pre-determined form and the perception of the unpredictability of the human being and nature, is

a strong parallel to Meisner's Technique. Meisner recognised that, 'nobody, not even the playwright, can determine how a life is going to live itself out sensitively, instinctively, on the stage' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 191). The presence of indeterminacy and the preference of an improvisational dynamic that is not calculated or predetermined is observable in every aspect of Meisner's acting methodology as we noted above in the connections between the Meisner Technique and John Cage's pursuit of indeterminacy.

Maciunas' third belief about 'concretism', that it 'opposes and rejects art itself, since the very meaning of it implies artificiality whether in creation of form or method' (Maciunas, 1965: 192), connects strongly to the vision of theatre that Meisner instils in his students. Meisner insists that the actor should ground their performance in their own reality, emphasising the importance of the actor working from their own perspective, and the instincts that they have by virtue of their physical and emotional standpoint on the world. During the opening observation exercises that I described in Chapter One, Meisner tells his students, 'That's you. That's you in person. Your observation was straight, unadulterated observation. What you observed, *you* observed, not a character in a play' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 19-20). When discussing the benefits of the Repetition exercise, Meisner emphasises that, 'the practitioner is somebody who is learning to funnel his [sic] instincts, not give performances' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 37). Meisner's distinction here directly opposes the creation of 'art' as Maciunas presents it, and grounds the actor's work within their own reality. In our discussion of Meisner's Independent Activity exercise, we saw how the activity the actor enters into must be something that they have the ability or skill to do, and that the 'reason why' they are doing it is based on their personal circumstances. All of these facets of Meisner's Technique show how it is not seeking to create art, but to engage in reality in particular ways. In this way, the Meisner Technique resonates strongly with Maciunas' claim that the 'concretist' moves away from art and towards reality. What is particularly interesting about Meisner, when seen from this perspective, is that he practised this move away from art and towards reality whilst

working within the paradigm of modern, realist theatre that is based on what Maciunas would see as illusionist principles.

The concerns that preoccupied Cage and Maciunas re-entered the tradition of performance in works of postmodern dance and the theatre practitioners who they were contemporary with (Schmitt, 1990: 16-17). Specifically it is in the work of Richard Foreman, Michael Kirby, and Robert Wilson that certain issues touched on and explored by Cage, Paik, and the ‘concretists’ formed the foundation on which theatrical performances were created. In their work, Cage’s pursuit of indeterminacy and Maciunas’ three principles of ‘concretism’ are reflected by, and incorporated within, the tradition of performance. This transmission is important for this work because it is within the tradition of performance that I am claiming Meisner’s Technique resonates particularly strongly. The connections that I have outlined above between the Meisner Technique and avant-garde artists are what allow his acting methodology to echo within paradigms of performance other than his own, but it is where these echoes are manifested in the work of other performance practitioners that are the moments of discourse that I have been laying the foundation for in my previous analyses. While Foreman, Kirby and Wilson are individual artists and the works that they produced had very distinctive aesthetics, they all approach, from different angles, the issues that Sanford Meisner addressed within his own performance training. Once more it is what Meisner claims as the foundation of acting that these issues coalesce around: The reality of doing. Indeterminacy and aspects of ‘concretism’ arise around this principle in Meisner’s Technique, and by pursuing their own particular artistic goals, Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson exhibit variations of the same preoccupation. While a work of this size cannot lay out such discourses in their entirety (if such a state of completion is even attainable), I intend to open the door to such exchanges that might be pursued in future theoretical and practical projects.

The openings through which indeterminacy is admitted to Meisner’s acting process, combined with his insistence on ‘the reality of doing’ and the resonances these have with practitioners

within postmodern paradigms of performance contribute to what I believe is the wider challenge the Meisner Technique mounts to the control of the author. By foregrounding random causation in his musical performances such as *Concerto for Prepared Piano* and *Songbooks*, John Cage highlights the abdication of authorial control. Such strategies encourage the audience to move beyond a simple reception of predetermined meaning, and require them to become responsible for any interpretation they make of the piece. John Cage, in conversation with Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, said that, ‘the less we structure the theatrical occasion ... the greater will be the stimulus to the structuring faculty of each person in the audience’ (Cage in Schmitt, 1990: 32). In this way, these pieces actualise the shift articulated by Roland Barthes some years later in ‘The Death of the Author’. In this work, Barthes calls for the end of interpreting works of art according to what the author intended and for their meaning to arise from the activity of receiving that work, a process he sums up by the mutually supporting phrases, ‘the death of the author,’ and, ‘the birth of the reader’ (Barthes, 2002: 105). Barthes’ work provides a theoretical framework for much of the non-realist theatre that was to follow it and was itself published as part of a ‘Fluxus kit’ in 1967 (Barthes, 1967). In the ‘New Theatre’ that directly followed Barthes’ ideas, meaning was left for the audience to create rather than being seen as a message to be transmitted as accurately as possible from the author to the audience.

The instances of indeterminacy that we have identified in Meisner’s practice disrupt the modernist ideal of a transparent medium through which meaning is conveyed from an author to an audience. Similarly to Cage’s work, the uncertainty of the performance means that meaning cannot be conveyed in a straightforward way, but must be constructed by the audience. As we saw in the Chapter Four, Meisner introduces a number of strategies in order to support the modern, realist mode of performance, but when the imperatives of this paradigm of performance are removed, the randomness that arises in the dynamic of the Technique can support the poststructuralist template of art as set forth by Barthes.

The challenge that Meisner's Technique might pose to modern, realist theatre goes beyond the introduction of indeterminacy, however. Possibly because Meisner insists on an instinctive, non-intellectual method of acting, he directly opposes the very idea of a pre-determined script that the actors have to recite, telling his students that, 'The text is your greatest enemy' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 136). Through this confrontational attitude to text, Meisner's Technique aligns with post-structuralist views of art and therefore opposes the modern, realist texts it was generally used to actualize. It may be surprising that an acting methodology that was primarily used to actualise modern, realist texts should be found to be in direct opposition to those very texts, but given the accumulation of our analyses this would appear to be the case. From the picture that has emerged, we might fairly assert that Meisner's Technique has a strong synergy with some forms of postmodern performance and can enter into a productive dialogue with them.

Given this conclusion, a number of aspects of our earlier analyses come into sharper focus, chief among which is Meisner's dismissal of character from the vocabulary of his actors. Meisner insists that his students remain themselves when performing, and that character, 'comes out of how you do what you do' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 156). This makes perfect sense in the paradigm suggested by Roland Barthes where meaning-making is the responsibility of the audience. From this perspective, the Meisner actor does not focus on character because this is left for the audience to construct for themselves. Instead the actor focuses on their actions, and the quality of these actions that they shape and manipulate according to the relationships that we analysed in the first three chapters. On this view of the theatre event, 'the reality of doing' is the actors' function in performance, and the interpretation of this action is the function of the audience.

The danger to my argument that Meisner's Technique aligns with Barthes' project is that when the actor challenges the authority of the author, they might potentially replace them as the creator and arbiter of meaning. This is precisely the objection that critics of Method Acting,

such as John Harrop, raise. We are now in a position to answer Harrop's accusation that, 'Such acting is based upon the false premise that display of feeling is of supreme importance. It leads to momentary ego gratification of the MTV sensibility' (Harrop, 1992: 43). What underlies criticisms such as this is the fear that the actor's 'self', their emotional, subjective personality, will supplant the author's power as the supreme decider of meaning. However, when seen through the post-structuralist lens where it is the audience who decide the meaning of a piece, this criticism must fall away. When operating according to this philosophy, the Meisner Technique disputes the authority of the writer and, by ensuring that the actor focuses on their reality of doing, it enables them to present a sequence of behaviour that the audience can then make meaning from. Rather than the display of the actor's emotion being of supreme importance as Harrop suggests, it is the display of a sequence of behaviour that allows the audience to construct meaning that is the focus. This behaviour is inevitably infused with emotion because of the unity of perception that we discussed in Chapter One, but it is the actions and the qualities of these actions that the actor must focus on. However, this is not the end of the intended process, because what *is* of supreme importance is the audience's active reception that empowers them to construct meaning from the piece. Again, it should be noted here that this argument relates to an application of the Meisner Technique beyond the paradigm of modern, realist theatre and does not dismiss the control that other factors, such as the play text, have on the audience's freedom to interpret the performance.

The synergy between Meisner and the modes of postmodern performance that we have outlined strengthens further when we take into account the challenge Lyotard makes to meta-narratives in *The Postmodern Condition*. From a certain perspective, it can be seen that this work builds directly upon Barthes', 'The Death of the Author', by further undermining authorial control of meaning, and making explicit the multiplicity that underpins Barthes' work. According to Lyotard, postmodernism is an attitude of 'incredulity towards meta-narratives' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv), those ways that aspects of human knowledge and experience are constructed within totalising frameworks. Instead of a single truth about the world being

dominant, Lyotard proposes that it should be replaced with a multiplicity of alternative and potentially contradictory narratives of equal validity (*ibid*). This fragmentation of the singular truth of modernism seems to call for just such a perspective-based approach to theatre as the Meisner Technique offers. According to my phenomenological analysis of Meisner's acting method, the actors' own perspective on the world is fundamental to their performance; their perspective is firmly implicated in the observation exercises that I discuss in Chapter One; it drives the Repetition exercise which forms the basis of inter-personal relationships; The Independent Activities exercise that amplifies the impulsive nature of the actor's behaviour is taken directly from it; Emotional Preparation and Particularisations are anchored firmly in it; and the emotional grasp of the subject matter that the Spoon River exercise demands arises directly from it. It is the phenomenological analysis of the reality of doing that allows us to appreciate the multiplicity of perspective in Meisner's work and the ways that his processes echo through the paradigms of postmodern performance. While my analysis does not deny that the Meisner Technique was originally part of the paradigm of modern, realist theatre within which several mechanisms operate to control the production of a singular truth, it does claim that the Meisner Technique as an acting approach can operate in such a way as to challenge such mechanisms.

As we have seen, Meisner's process echoes most strongly within the paradigm of postmodern performance around the issue of 'the reality of doing'. Meisner explicitly and emphatically takes this principle as the foundation of his acting methodology, and it is the pursuit of this that admits the indeterminacy that we saw echoed in John Cage. The acts of perception upon which the Meisner actor bases their performance cannot be wholly predetermined and therefore result in a spontaneous stream of behaviour. These acts of perception are necessary for the actor to engage in the reality of doing because without them the actor is cut off from the world they are directly engaging with through action. It is this separation of the actor's self from the reality around them that Meisner fought with strategies such as the removal of the concept of character from his actors' vocabulary. It is therefore the perceptual act that ties

together indeterminacy, that became so important to John Cage, with the reality of doing, that became the focus of the ‘concretists’, in the Meisner Technique. This shows us how the echoes of Meisner in the paradigm of postmodern performance allow us to view this paradigm in a fresh light. Rather than the ‘concretists’ shifting their focus from John Cage’s quest for indeterminacy towards Maciunas’ three principles, Meisner’s Technique has illustrated that indeterminacy is a central feature of any concrete action in the world. Where Maciunas sought unity of form and content, improvisation, and art nihilism, he was implicitly embracing indeterminacy through each of these principles. Fundamentally, where this pursuit of ‘the reality of doing’ re-enters the tradition of performance through the diverse practices of Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson, the echoes of Meisner’s Technique become sharp and distinct.

# Richard Foreman

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Richard Foreman, the first postmodern director that I will be discussing in relation to the Meisner Technique, worked both in commercial theatre and as the founder and artistic director of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. While he was happy to engage in the mainstream musical theatre conventions of his time in his commercial work, he viewed his Ontological-Hysteric works as his ‘serious’ art (Foreman, 1992: 41). In this chapter I will be exclusively examining his work under the auspices of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre.

As with each of the postmodern practitioners that I will be examining in this part of this project Foreman is an individual artist, and his work can be seen as postmodern precisely because of the way it eludes easy definition. Here I will be examining particular features of Foreman’s work with the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and suggesting particular resonances between it and the working processes of the Meisner Technique. It is worth restating here that I in no way intend for the reader to infer from this that their processes overlap professionally, paradigmatically, or even personally. What I am suggesting here is that the working processes of the Meisner Technique and Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric Theatre share a number of concerns and preoccupations that mean that the two performance practices can be put into dialogue with one another. Precisely because of the extreme diversity of the perspectives from which these two bodies of work originate, the discourse (as opposed to communication) can be extremely productive.

The first distinction between Meisner and Foreman to be brought to the fore is that Meisner intended to train acting students in his classes, while Foreman directed performers in order to express his own meaning through his Ontological-Hysteric productions. However, the level at which I claim we can see resonances between the two practitioners is at the level of the studio – for Foreman this was in rehearsal and production of his own writing, and for Meisner this was within his classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse. Within each of these distinct environments, the two worked towards specific effects through their interaction with their

actors/performers. It is the phenomenological experience of actors/performers that I am concerned with here. It bears restating that I am not concerned with either of these two people *as* people and the particular intentions that may or may not be behind their work, but with the processes they instigated in their work with performers.

Foreman's attitude to his performers could, on the surface, appear diametrically opposed to Sanford Meisner's. In Foreman's early works, he chose to work with non-professional actors, who he would treat somewhat like objects to be arranged on the stage in such a way as to make the purpose behind his writing as clear as possible (Davy, 1981: 178). His communications with his actors consisted primarily of physical instructions, and were aimed to create specific tensions within them that he believed would make his own meaning more precise. For example, in his 1992 collection of writing, *Unbalancing Acts*, Foreman describes how he deliberately manipulates the level of tension in his performers: 'I frequently give performers positions that put the body in a state of tension. Or I do the opposite; I give them positions that suggest a degree of relaxation inappropriate to the situation. Both options break through the shell of normal behaviour' (Foreman, 1992: 40). To make clear the dimension on which he is focused, he asserts, 'in my theater, there was no project to dream into. There was only the physical being trying to manipulate his body in the material world' (Foreman, 1992: 37).

As we saw in the Independent Activity chapter, Meisner deliberately engages the physical actions of his performers in order to create certain tensions within them. Specifically, the physical difficulty of the actor performing a nearly impossible task is put into tension with the urgency and the importance of completing that activity as well as their distraction by their acting partner who is attempting to engage them in Repetition. In rehearsal, Foreman has been recorded as introducing specific physical tensions into the bodies of his actors. He explains this in *Unbalancing Acts* in the following terms:

*Ours is an era of stress, and serious art reflects that stress, even if it wants to establish an alternative. The plays I write reflect that stress,*

*and I think the performers should as well. Just as classical ballet employs a technique in which dancers work out of a tension sustained in the body, for many years I was interested in an acting style in which the performance uncoiled from a centre of tension.*

(Foreman, 1992: 41)

These physical directions from Foreman were designed to make each gesture and each line of dialogue as clear as possible to the audience. In the Meisner Technique on the other hand, the physical tensions involved in the Independent Activity exercise make the actor's behaviour more spontaneous, and thereby less considered than Foreman's performers, but in doing so the intentions and being-in-the-world of the actor become clearer to an observer. We can see in this instance an excellent example of the frisson that the differences between Meisner and Foreman create at the same time that resonances between them are sounded. This a good case of what I am referring to when I say that the process instigated by the two practitioners can enter into discourse rather than communication with one another; it is the differences sitting alongside the similarities that make this especially productive.

One issue around which the concerns of Meisner and Foreman coalesce particularly strongly is the harnessing of the whole personality of the actor/performer. As I have made clear in the preceding chapters, Meisner's directions, while Behaviourist from a certain perspective, can also be seen to harness the holistic, phenomenological being-in-the-world of his students. In this it is the action of the students, anchored in their personalities and their own particular realities that form the basis on which the work is undertaken. In Foreman's case, it is the physical dimension and personality of each performer that he intends to harness. In *Unbalancing Acts*, Foreman writes, 'What interested me was taking people from real life, non-actors, and putting them onstage to allow their real personalities to have a defiant impact on the conventional audience' (Foreman, 1992: 32). A parallel process also operates within the Meisner Technique, but with a subtle difference of tone that has significant consequences. The Meisner Technique harnesses the actor's holistic grasp of the world including aspects of their personality. Repeatedly throughout the programme of training, Meisner reinforces to his

students that it is what makes *them* react that should determine their behaviour. This relates to the subjective, perspective-oriented processes that the training instigates. However, the effect that the Meisner Technique aims to have on the audience is not a defiant one, but an ‘authentic’, emotional one. As such, Meisner’s invocation of the actor’s personality serves to reinforce the very modes of theatre that Foreman was seeking to challenge. However, in the pursuit of these divergent aims, both practitioners were exploiting the performer’s individual personality, perspective, and pre-existing history.

A further feature that the two practitioners share is the dismissal of character from their working processes. This relates specifically to the above point where it is clear that Meisner attempts to utilise the personality of the individual actor in order to create a specific effect. While Meisner never ruled out the existence of character outside of the moment of the actor’s performance, he refused to allow them to discuss their work in that moment in terms of character (Moseley, 2005: 126). The removal of character from the Meisner Technique is very close to the way that Foreman has discussed the role that his performers play in his productions. In interview with David Savran, he has even gone so far as to say that, ‘character is an error, [...] our characters are determined by the accidents of our birth and our social circumstances. If you go a step further, you can say that they’re the accidents of our genes’ (Foreman in Savran, 1988: 43). This attitude is reinforced by the way that Foreman largely directs his performers in terms of their physical actions, and not in terms of any character they might be assumed to be portraying. He admits that, ‘If an actor is having great difficulty with a scene I sometimes will offer suggestions in psychological terms, but in general I prefer to propose to the actor physical sensations the character might be feeling in his or her body’ (Foreman, 1992: 45). He claims not to think about the people represented in his works as characters, but rather to see them as particular perspectives from which his lines are delivered. David Savran makes the assertion that these perspectives are able to embody, ‘the different, shifting voices within consciousness, manifestations of the various selves vying for control of the pen’ (Savran, 1988: 36). If this is indeed the case, the performers do not

represent characters as much as the various voices of Foreman himself. In the Meisner Technique, the perspective that the line is delivered from is prioritised over any sense of character. It is worth restating that this dismissal of character is from the moment of performance, and there is indeed some discussion of character in objective terms at certain parts of the training, but this does not impinge upon the actual processes at work in executing the Technique. Sydney Pollock found the essence of the Meisner Technique to be tied to this question of perspective rather than an objective sense of character, noting that, ‘there are thousands of ways of doing the text and what is required is a point of view – a real sense of who you are and what you are doing’ (Pollack in Doob, 1985: 35’00’’). Therefore despite the divergent practices involved, Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and the Meisner Technique have a parallel attitude on this issue and both give the ascendency to perspective over an objective grasp of character.

In Foreman’s later work with the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, he moved along Kirby’s continuum of not-acting/acting towards a more ‘complex’ style of acting (Davy, 1981: 179). In the context of this continuum, Kirby is at pains to point out that there is no value judgement attached to the terms ‘complexity’ and ‘simplicity’, but that they are employed in order to indicate the degree to which the acting in question is embedded within matrices of character and meaning (Kirby, 2002: 52). Some attribute the movement of the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre towards the complex end of this continuum to the influence that Manheim has had on his work and Foreman endorses this perspective. However, despite a greater degree of ‘complexity’ in the acting, Foreman’s later works are still a long way from realist productions and retain within them many of the preoccupations that dominate his earliest works. For example, in *Rhoda in Potatoland*, Manheim describes the process she went through in a particular scene in which she entered, examined the audience, and lay on a table where she had a hysterical reaction to a potato that was placed on her stomach. Her account of her examination of the audience shows that she is reacting directly to them, an engagement that she allows to fluctuate depending on her attitude on the particular night (Davy, 1981: 181).

When she reacts hysterically to the potato on the other hand, she concentrates on the physical score that she and Foreman had established in their rehearsals. She recalls that she was creating, "just the appearance of such a state"--going through the "motions" of hysteria rather than living through such an experience emotionally' (*ibid*). The examination of the audience could be seen as similar to the Meisner actor who is trained to react directly to their environment, and to allow the way their life is lived out sensitively on stage to alter from night to night. To take an example from Meisner's teaching in *Masterclass*, he makes one of his students lie down on the bed and to be as still as possible and then proceeds to annoy them and attempt to break their concentration. He makes it clear that it is not enough to mentally block the interruptions out, but that they need to react to them in accordance with what their intention was. In this case, this results in the actor getting up and showing Meisner out of the room before continuing with their activity (Meisner, 2006: 115'00"). The second part of the scene from *Rhoda in Potatoland*, where Manheim follows the physical score of hysteria, however, might be seen as the opposite of this – there is no emotional involvement sought, but a physical routine designed to represent a particular experience. So while the first part of Manheim's performance aligns with the moment-to-moment reactivity that the Meisner Technique is built upon, the second part would seem to depart from this by executing a physical score separated from the emotional dimension it represents.

However, even within this second section there is a connection between the practices through which we can bring them into discourse with one another. The foundation of acting, according to the Meisner Technique is 'the reality of doing'. In this context the reality of doing involves the phenomenological engagement with the world that I set out in the first three chapters of this work, and of particular relevance here is the fundamental connectedness of physical, emotional and abstract dimensions of the actors' experience. It would be fair to say that Manheim's account of her hysterical reaction to the potato is also founded on a reality of doing, but in making such a comparison it should be noted that in each of the two situations the 'reality of doing' has a very different meaning. In Manheim's case, the reality of doing

involves her performing specific actions in order to represent a hysterical fit to the audience. However, these very real differences shouldn't obscure the fact that we are able to discuss both practices with these terms. The useful function that the phrase 'the reality of doing' performs in this instance is that it points precisely at the distinguishing feature of the two practices. While both centre around performing 'real' actions, it is precisely what defines the performers' reality in each instance that separates them. While Manheim's 'reality' is that of a performer executing a pre-established physical score in order to represent something to the audience, the 'reality' of the Meisner actor is the integrated physical, emotional, and imaginative engagement with the world that we have described earlier in this work. Therefore, even when the practices of the Meisner Technique and Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre are undeniably different, the terms of this discussion allow us to bring the two processes into discourse with one another. Such engagement between these practices expands our understanding of each. In this particular instance we can see how Manheim's process involves an isolation of the physical dimension of hysterical behaviour and an integration of this with the emotional dimension of her present self as a performer. To say that she is merely performing a physical score is not as enlightening as this picture because the performer is not a purely physical entity and to appreciate their engagement with their work in a fuller sense this must be acknowledged, and it is the juxtaposition with the Meisner Technique that has allowed us to make this apparent. On the other hand, Manheim's account isolates particular features of the Meisner Technique that are otherwise minimised or glossed over. Through the teaching of the Meisner Technique, the integration of the physical, emotional, and abstract dimensions is emphasised over their separation, and so a comparison with Manheim's process here highlights the effect of this integration in a unique and sharply defined manner. While the Meisner actors' use of 'the reality of doing' to create particular effects is hugely different from Manheim's in this instance, the connection still shows that the processes involved in their particular works can be discussed in similar terms. In short, even this similarity/difference is another instance of discourse.

To avoid the accusation of conflating these two practitioners, it is a worthwhile exercise to briefly outline the overall artistic direction of Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. Foreman repeatedly asserted that the purpose of this theatre is to wake the audience up to their immediate perceptions of the world, or as he puts it in the first Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto, that he, 'want[ed] to be seized by the elusive, unexpected aliveness of the moment' (Foreman, 1976: 76). In the course of pursuing this goal, Foreman waged a war against the 'old' theatre that is typified by the modern, realistic paradigm in which Meisner is placed. It should also be noted here that Foreman extended this war to the theatre of Grotowski and The Living Theatre (Foreman, 1976: 70). It should therefore not be implied that Foreman (in his Ontological-Hysteric mode as opposed to his popular theatre work) would have had seen much in common between his own work and the Meisner Technique. However, even in this case of explicit paradigmatic conflict, we find grounds to establish discourse. For example, Foreman's quest of waking his audience up to their immediate perceptions of their environment is a distinctly phenomenological imperative.

Through his writing process, the actions of his performers, and the experience he intended to create for the spectators of his performance events, Foreman sought to constantly throw the perceiving subject back to their direct experience of the moment. He achieved this in his writing process through a repeated resetting of his creative flow by taking a nap, and resuming his writing by 'beginning again' (Foreman, 1994: 1985). Foreman makes this process further transparent by the invitation on his website for anyone to access his notebooks of dialogue and juxtapose various pages of these to create their own plays. In reference to his own method with these notebooks Foreman says,

*I write-- usually at the beginning of the day, from one half to three pages of dialogue. There is no indication of who is speaking-- just raw dialogue. From day to day, there is no connection between the pages, each day is a total 'start from scratch' with no necessary reference to material from previous days' work.*

*... Every few months, I look through the accumulated material with the thought of constructing a 'play'. I find a page that seems interesting*

*and possible as a 'key' page-- and then quickly scan through to find others that might relate in some way to that 'key' page.*

*The relationship is not narrative-- but loosely thematic-- in a very poetic sense-- even in simply an 'intuited' way. Often-- I cannot explain why-- simply that one page seems interesting in a yet undefinable way, if juxtaposed to other selected pages.*

(Foreman, <http://ontological.com/FOREMAN/notebooks.html>: accessed 28/12/12)

This method of assembling his plays accentuates the continual restart that Foreman enforces on himself with his naps during the writing process. By further interrupting any continuity that exists between the pages and connecting them poetically and intuitively rather than logically and narratively, Foreman, as collator of his play opens himself to any intuitive connections between the pages that his direct experience of the moment might suggest and therefore further prioritises the subject's direct experience of the world in his creative process.

At the level of working with his performers this imperative is further stressed. He instructs his performers simply in terms of the actions that he wants them to perform, cutting them off from any deeper significance that their actions may have in terms of the production as a whole. In his early work Foreman chose to work with non-actors (Kaye, 1994: 55), a decision that would mean that they would be less likely to imply a deeper psychological significance beyond that which their immediate action suggests.

The resulting presentation, as a product of these processes of writing and performance, gives the audience a series of contradictory signs that cancel the apparent meaning conveyed by one another. For example, in *Pandering to the Masses*, Nick Kaye notes that, 'the performance undercuts itself as it traces out, at each successive moment, expectations that are systematically let down' (Kaye, 1994: 54). By constantly refusing the possibility of establishing a coherent and unified meaning from the signals that the event consists of, Foreman is turning the focus of the production away from what acts of perception can lead us to understand, to what we can know of the act of perception itself. The parallels between Foreman's work and the phenomenological theories of Husserl and Heidegger immediately become clear; in both

cases, objective truths about the world (or the work) are bracketed as being beyond the immediate concern of the perceiver. Instead it is the structure of perception itself that is focussed upon and what this can tell us about human experience itself as opposed to the objects of that experience.

The parallels between Foreman and Meisner are just as striking as those between Foreman and the phenomenological method. Just as Foreman confines his performers' sphere of awareness to the acts they perform, Meisner, through his claim that, 'the foundation of acting is the reality of doing,' does the same to his actors. The difference is that in the Meisner Technique the reality of doing is entirely the domain of the actor, and because of the conventions of modern, realist theatre the audience are encouraged to construct meaning, narrative, and unity from what they perceive, whereas Foreman resists any such construction through his writing process and the sequence of actions that result from this. However, in each case, the performer is fulfilling a similar function; in both situations the performer focuses on the reality of their actions and their own direct experience of their environment in the course of performing them. The point of greatest divergence, as we saw in Manheim's account of her hysteria in *Rhoda in Potatoland*, is exactly what defines the performers' realities in each instance, the aspects of their environment that they engage directly with, and the differing effects such different processes have. Foreman, however, is extending the situation of the performer engaging with their direct perception of the world, which Meisner created through his training, to every aspect of his work. In this case, therefore, the echo of Meisner's process reverberates through every aspect of Foreman's performance events.

Throughout this chapter we have shown a range of the connections between Meisner and Foreman and juxtaposed these with the very real, material differences between their processes. This is the beginning of the process required to bring such divergent theatre practitioners into discourse with one another. The differences are not to be shied away from or minimised, but instead of constructing walls of impenetrable ideology between them, they

can be used to create a productive dialogue between the two sets of working practices. While I present the first moments of such a discourse below, such a discourse is impossible to contain or complete. What I hope to do by opening a discourse between the working processes of the Meisner Technique and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre is to show the very possibility of such a discourse and to thereby prove the relevance of the Meisner Technique beyond the paradigm of theatre that it was historically a part of.

While I state above that the Meisner Technique and Richard Foreman's processes of working with performers in the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre did not overlap paradigmatically, historically, or personally, culturally they do have a similar trait. As I note earlier in this work in relation to Freud, central to Meisner's programme is the quest to liberate the 'self' of the actor from the social and psychological constraints that they are subject to. What we can now see is that Foreman sought through his Ontological-Hysteric Theatre to free the audience members from preconceptions and open them up to their direct experience of their present reality. It might be seen that this is a particularly American preoccupation of freedom from tyranny, and it is on this issue that the two practices can inform one another. The Meisner Technique works to free the actor from the constraints that they are bound by, but predominantly in the service of modern, realist theatre. However, Richard Foreman seeks to free the audience from the psychological constraints that they are subject to, and in doing so also liberates himself as a writer of dialogue, as a collator of scripts, and his performers from the constraints of narrative and preconception. What Foreman's processes might then say of the Meisner Technique is that it is noble in its intent, but ultimately falls down by supporting a paradigm of theatre that lulls the audience's perceptions of their present realities to sleep. The retort to this is that, as I have shown in Chapter Four, the Meisner Technique is not inherently bound to this mode of theatre and can therefore be used to actualise a non-realistic forms of performance that do not have this effect. As Foreman might suggest, this has not historically been the case as the Meisner Technique has been mainly used to serve modern, realist theatre. This discourse leads us to suggest that there is a great potential for the exploration of the Meisner Technique

outside of this paradigm of theatre. David Shirley's article about the contemporary uses of the Meisner Technique within British acting schools suggests that this is being done to some extent, but even this discussion tends to lead it back to the preoccupations of modern, realist theatre (objectives, textual analysis etc.) (Shirley, 2010: 211). In terms of this discourse between the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and the Meisner Technique, the next step might be to take up Richard Foreman's invitation to collate a script from his notebooks and work towards performing it with the spontaneity activated by the Meisner Technique's exercises.

The discourse that I suggest between the Meisner Technique and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre draws upon the phenomenologically-aligned imperatives that underpin each of the practices. It is here that the phenomenological perspectives that I have invoked in this work can enter into the discourse. Levinas bases his subjective ethics on the 'face-to-face' meeting of subjects and, as we have shown, these subjective ethics underpin the interpersonal dynamic between actors of the Meisner Technique. What the discourse between the Meisner Technique and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre then suggests is that a practical experiment in Levinas' ethics might be possible. If the performers base their performance on an encounter with one another that endorses the transcendence of the other, and the performance in which this takes place is built upon the disrupted processes of Foreman's writing and collation, the totalising influence of the modern, realist script is removed and the encounter can take place with greater authenticity. Furthermore, by including within the given circumstances of the play that the performers are aware of the space that they are performing in and the audience members watching them, this event might also initiate a more authentic contact between the performers and the audience. Such a dynamic might open every participant up to their perception of the present moment as the Meisner Technique does for actors and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre does for the audience. This might potentially further Richard Foreman's stated aims by increasing the degree of awakening taking place; it might potentially extend Meisner's processes of liberating the performer from their psychological constraints by making them receptive to and dependent upon the audience's reactions just as much as their

acting partner; it might also provide a tangible grounding to Levinas' ethical theories which, while less pure than abstract reasoning can aspire to be, enables such dynamics as he described to be viscerally experienced.

The above is, of course, a hypothetical proposal and only marks the very beginnings of a discourse between the two practices on a phenomenological basis. What it does show, however, is that such a discourse is indeed possible. Furthermore, it is the substantial difference between the practices combined with points of parallel concerns and preoccupations that make this an instance of discourse rather than communication. As discourse, this interaction is able to relate perspectives that are transcendent from one another and therefore make productive and substantive impacts upon one another.

# Michael Kirby

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Michael Kirby is another practitioner of ‘New Theatre’ in whose work the echoes of the Meisner Technique can be detected, but in very different ways. Michael Kirby has had a significant impact on avant-garde performance of the Twentieth Century in two distinct ways, the first as a practitioner and the second as a critic and scholar. It is the first of these roles that I intend to discuss in this chapter. Kirby, as founder of the Structuralist Workshop, created an environment where he could bring processes directly from the world of minimal art into theatre practice in an experimental, laboratory setting (Kaye, 1996:115).

On the surface of it, it would appear that there is a large degree of commonality between Kirby’s attitude to theatre acting and the Meisner Technique. Kirby says that,

*'Somehow theatre to me is realistic. I think we all understand realism. What I try to do isn't just realism, though, it's film acting. I've tried to do very intimate performances, to get the audience close to the actors so they don't need to project. It really bothers me to see actors pumping it out, as I would say – pushing it out. Often in New York in a small theatre you will see actors, realistic actors, working much too hard for the space. They think they're on Broadway. They think they're in a huge theatre and they're playing to the balcony. They're doing all this big stuff and I can't bear it. These things are related fundamentally. I think in terms of comparison to life, and that's what films are doing.'*

(Kirby in Kaye, 1996: 116).

Given the opinions identified by Shirley (2010), Harrop (1992: 42), and Baron (2007: 8), among others that Method Acting in general, and Meisner acting in particular can be most easily applied to film acting, it might seem that the Meisner Technique is eminently compatible with Kirby’s theatre practices. Furthermore, Meisner frequently expresses a dislike of the empty gesturing of some (particularly British) acting. David Shirley alludes to this in his 2010 article about the adaption of the Meisner Technique by British actor training institutions (Shirley, 2010: 200). However, the most powerful resonance with this observation from Kirby comes from Meisner’s 1987 book where he claims that, ‘The trouble with English actors is their use of

energy. It's got to be there, but they think of it as stage energy, with no emotional backbone, no support' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 147).

Kirby's work, as exemplified by *First Signs of Decadence*, forcibly overlays realistic conventions with formal structure. This play might be seen as an example of the direct application of the core tenets from his 1987 book, *A Formalist Theatre*. In *First Signs of Decadence*, a realistic story that suggests meaning, narrative, and unity is played out within a structure in which the performers are forced to follow very specific rules. As they perform the script and the score that Kirby requires of them, the performers are put into a situation in which they embody the tension between two arbitrarily connected imperatives, and whether they justify each in terms of the other or simply present the juxtaposition to the audience without any attempt at making realistic sense out of it, the meaning implied by each is destabilised by the other. This leads to the production of multiple meanings that thwart the resolution of any singular interpretation of the event, despite such a unified interpretation being suggested by the invocation of realistic convention. Kirby claims that *First Signs of Decadence* is,

*one of the most difficult plays to act that I know of, because of that tremendous split between a realistic acting and justifying actions that are impossible to justify. But the more people do justify it, the more exciting it is. If they give in or don't even try -- it would still be interesting, but I don't think it would be that interesting.*

(Kirby in Kaye, 1996: 117)

This makes it explicit that it is when the formal nature of the play's structure is engaged with by the realistic techniques of the actor that the play's processes are at their most interesting.

The tension that we witness in Kirby's *First Signs of Decadence*, is present in a slightly different way in the work of Meisner's actors. Just like Kirby, Meisner is working within the paradigm of realistic theatre, while at the same time insisting that the actors perform real actions on stage. However, where Meisner trains his actors to 'funnel [their] instincts' (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 37) in such a way as to allow the audience to construct a unified meaning from what they perceive, Kirby is insisting on particular actions that inhibit such a reading being made.

This means that while Meisner is using the ‘reality of doing’ that his performers engage in to support and solidify the paradigm he is working within, Kirby is using a similar reality of doing in order to make suspect the assumptions of the paradigm he is throwing into question. The difference between Meisner and Kirby that allows these distinct results to be achieved is that Meisner encourages his actors to engage in spontaneous, instinctual reactions to the world that they perceive, but creates the conditions through which these can support the production of a specific script, while Kirby requires that his performers perform actions that bear no relationship to the realistic narrative they are supposedly representing. Kirby’s work therefore echoes Meisner’s in such a way that the singular meaning that the Meisner Technique aims to produce is destabilised in the productions of Kirby in order to question any such singularity and unity of interpretation. The interesting feature of this is that Kirby is using tools that are almost identical to those that Meisner employs, but he uses them against each other to create incongruity whereas Meisner used them in a coordinated fashion in order to smooth the audience’s journey to their own unified interpretation of the performance.

However, Kirby’s assertion that *First Signs of Decadence* is particularly challenging for actors suggests that a look at his other works might show us a slightly different relationship to the Meisner Technique. If we compare *First Signs of Decadence* to *Double Gothic*, the element of the former that might be so challenging for actors to perform comes into clearer focus. Michael Kirby makes it clear that Structuralism in the creation of theatre is designed to make elements of structure dominate the presentation rather than just forming the ‘armature’ on to which the other (traditionally more significant) facets of theatre hang (Kirby, 1975: 82). Rather than Structuralism being a form of theatre with entirely new elements from what has come before, Kirby intends it to be a re-ordering of the priorities of traditional theatre, an interpretation that would account for his predilection for realism. In *First Signs of Decadence* this foregrounding of the structure of performance is largely confined to the work of the actor within the production. It is in the actors’ performances that the tension between realism and a formal structure is exhibited by the contrasting imperatives of predefined actions that must

be justified in terms of a realistic narrative. In *Double Gothic*, on the other hand, Kirby uses other devices to make structure the dominant feature of the work. While he again employs a realistic style, and in this case the narrative conventions of Gothic novels, by presenting the scenes within particular corridors on the stage that are defined by fabric screens and specific lighting, and by moving each scene progressively closer or further away from the audience, he is deliberately structuring the playing space. In this case the tension between the structure and the realistic conventions employed is widened beyond the domain of the actors' performances and created by the juxtaposition of the realistic scenes (including the actors' performances) and the structural divisions of the space.

Kirby also deliberately brings the structure of the narrative itself to the foreground in *Double Gothic*. Inspired by Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*, Kirby sought to isolate particular narrative events that are common to the Gothic novel and to highlight these moments in the mind of the audience by juxtaposing the same moments from two separate stories with one another (Kirby, 1987: 139). This is another device that makes the structure the dominant element in the theatrical presentation. In contrast to the situation of *First Signs of Decadence*, here the actor's work is confined within a compartment of the performance that is not substantially altered from what it would be in a straight, realistic production of the same story. However, by bringing the structure of the narrative(s) to the audience's attention, these realist performances work within an overall production that furthers Structuralist aims rather than those of the modern, realist theatre.

This is a particularly interesting example because it illustrates just how little the Meisner Technique might be confined to an application within the modern, realist theatre that it was created to serve. Through *Double Gothic*, Kirby shows how realist theatre can be used in innovative ways in order to surpass what might have been considered the outer limits of what that mode of performance could achieve. This brings the consequences of Kirby's statement that the actor need not be aware of the formal structure of the piece they are performing to

satisfy the Structuralist demands that the structure of the piece be brought into focus (Kirby in Kaye, 1996: 117). In this example the work of the actor is just one component of the larger production, and a component that is not inherently bound up with the overriding artistic direction of the piece. In this way we can see how the Meisner Technique might be applied to certain works in such a way as to challenge the conventions of modern, realist theatre without substantively altering its working processes. This also resonates with our earlier discussion of the subjective ethics that underpin the Meisner Technique according to an interpretation from Levinas' perspective, and the deliberate removal of any objective, moral judgements from its moment-to-moment operation. Similarly, in *Double Gothic*, the actor does not need to have the structure and the spatial arrangement of the piece upper-most in their mind in order to perform their role within it. In fact, because the structural elements are emphasised by other parts of the production, if the actors were to reduce their engagement with the realistic performances they have been tasked with, the aesthetic might become muddled, and the structure would once again recede into the background of the presentation.

This has a very strong connection with the operation of the Meisner Technique because, as I have made clear earlier in this work, the actor's function within the theatrical event is to shape and execute a stream of instinctive behaviour in order that the wider concerns of the production may be realised. However, as they perform their roles an objective grasp of the production (such as an understanding of their character as an entity that is separate to them) detracts from the execution of this behaviour.

A strong strand through all of these examples has been the way that Michael Kirby recognised the potential versatility of realistic performances and the fact that such a style need not detract from more avant-garde productions, such as those Structuralism sought to create. This gives weight to Meisner's claim that the actor whose craft is rooted in the 'reality of doing' and 'living truthfully under the imaginary circumstances of the play' is not limited to naturalism,

but can perform in any style. Kirby's work, as exemplified by *Double Gothic*, shows how such an application of the Meisner Technique might be deployed in order to actualise other styles.

Given the strong connections between the Meisner Technique and Kirby's work on the subject of realism, the impression might be given that the practices are so compatible that there is no frisson or tension between them at all. However, Meisner's preoccupation with the liberation of the individual that we recognised in the last chapter does not sit well with Kirby's stated artistic purpose. By emphasising the structural elements of performance, Kirby was effectively downplaying the agency of the individual and instead drawing the audience's attention to the larger frameworks and pressures that the individual is working within. Such a concern would seem to contradict what we proposed might be an especially American concern for the liberation of the individual from tyranny. Indeed, Kirby makes it clear that the Structuralist is not concerned with personal idiosyncrasies, or with intuition, that he considers to be the traditional sources of creativity (Kirby, 1987: 152). While he admits that such qualities will be present within Structuralist works, they will be present in a vastly different way, governed first of all by the structural elements of the piece rather than the personal instinct of the creator. This contrasts sharply to the way the Meisner Technique harnesses the holistic being-in-the-world of the performer and uses this as the basis for their performance, an approach that could scarcely be more removed from Kirby's move to limit such personal idiosyncrasy.

However, by Kirby putting realistic performances within a piece that foregrounds its own structure, he shows exactly how personal idiosyncrasy can be a part of such presentations. Secondly, despite claiming a 'pure' grounding for his formal structures, it could be seen that the enforcement of the particular structures that he chooses to emphasise are in themselves the result of his own personal idiosyncrasies and creative inspiration. For instance, when discussing the all-female casting of *Double Gothic*, Kirby claims that he is 'fond of such [arbitrary] decisions' (Kirby, 1987: 140). Such 'fondness' for the deployment of formal structure within pieces would seem to indicate the role that personal inspiration plays within

his creative process. He claims that he came to this particular arbitrary decision because the previous piece he directed involved an all-male cast, but does not elaborate on what the abstract reason was for making that casting decision. It could therefore be concluded that the binary opposition of elements in his productions, in this case the gender of the cast, is something that is of particular personal interest to him and that his instinct leads him to explore. Far from being the result of external, arbitrary forces, such strategies therefore simply betray a different set of personally motivated processes.

The use of binary oppositions is also noticeable within his scholarly work, and in particular his 'Acting and Not-Acting', article that I refer to earlier. By forming a continuum between the two extreme points of a binary opposition, Kirby attempts to soften the picture of such oppositions and to add greater complexity than would otherwise be in existence. However, while the continuum is a more nuanced model than a simple binary opposition, it does suggest a linear progression from one point to another and minimises other dimensions of difference between two separate entities. This use of the continuum streams from Kirby's stated aim to make the study of theatre more scientific than it has been in the past. He therefore applies 'Structural Analysis' to particular issues of theatre in an attempt to create a sort of taxonomy of the different forms and processes that can occur.

Such a scientific model would be in a considerable degree of conflict with the phenomenological analysis that I have provided of the Meisner Technique. It would seem to favour objective classifications and judgements above the subjective perspectives upon which such judgements are built. This, taken together with his reverence for the abstract structures of form, show that the paradigm of performance that he was working within is in direct conflict with the one that the Meisner Technique was operating in accordance with. However, as we have shown in the preceding chapters, such paradigms might work alongside and within one another. As in *Double Gothic*, the modern, realist paradigm can function within the overarching framework provided by Structuralism. Therefore, rather than being a situation of

paradigmatic dominance, rupture, and revolution, an environment can be created where the modes of performance can be brought together collaboratively in order to strengthen and fertilise one another.

Despite the differences between personal idiosyncrasies and formal structure on the one hand, and the subjective, perspective-based approach and the objective scientific model on the other, Kirby's approach to performance and the Meisner Technique's approach to acting methodology come back together on the larger issue of the dimension in which theatre/performance operates. As I have made it clear earlier in this work, the Meisner Technique activates the actors' holistic being-in-the-world and uses the sum of their experience, incorporating physical, emotional, and abstract aspects of that experience in order to create their performances. It is also clear that, according to Meisner, the effect of such work should similarly engage the holistic perception of the audience, both at an intellectual level and an emotional one (Meisner, 1987: 87).

Where Kirby's aspiration to a scientific approach in the study of theatre comes into tension with itself is on the subject of the audience's appreciation of the theatre event. Firstly he claims that all of the elements of structure that the Structuralist focuses on in their work are actualised within the mind of the audience member rather than on the stage or anywhere else within objective space. What is particularly interesting here is that Kirby deliberately distinguishes the mind of the audience from the operation of the brain that a more scientific model might take as its target. He makes it clear that the intellect, the emotion, and the whole perception of the audience member play into this 'mind' (Kirby, 1976: 61). Kirby's picture of the 'mind' of the audience member that he is hoping to create structures within is therefore very close to the holistic perception that is the target of phenomenological enquiry. Furthermore, by explicitly claiming that the structures are created in the mind of the audience member rather than in objective space, Kirby is making the perception of the audience his primary focus that he attempts to access through a manipulation of abstract space and time.

This is in actual fact a mirror of the particular dynamic of the Meisner Technique where the actor engages in subjective, personal actions in order to shape a stream of behaviour in the theatre space. Where Kirby manipulates the objective in order to affect the subjective, the Meisner actor manipulates the subjective in order to affect the objective. This comparison can show us more than this, however. Just as Kirby shapes the objective to affect the subjective experience of the audience, the actor's use of their own subjective action to shape a stream of behaviour can be seen to have the same intended target – the audience's subjective perception. Therefore Kirby's theatre work illuminates the processes of the Meisner Technique especially well by showing how processes set in motion within the theatre space touch on the audience's experience of the event.

Kirby boils all of his structural devices down to the dimension of the human grasp of time (Kirby, 1975: 82). He discusses how repetition sets up the expectation of future repetitions that encourage the audience to look forward to future moments where the structure rises up in their perceptual field. Similarly he notes how moments of these repetitions deliberately recall earlier instances and therefore bring the memory of the audience into play (*ibid*). Such deliberate manipulation of the human grasp of time (as opposed to the objectively measured passing of time) directly recalls Husserl's account of the human perception of time through the transcendental phenomenological reduction of listening to a melody (Husserl, 1991: 5). However, it is in the present moment of performance that a strong resonance with the Meisner Technique arises. The Meisner Technique allows actors to fully engage in the present moment of performance in order to create particular streams of behaviour through which the audience construct a representational experience for themselves. The connection between the Meisner Technique and Kirby's vision of Structuralism therefore shows how the actor in the moment of performance is able to create performances that reach forward and backward in the audience's perception of time, thereby creating structures that extend beyond the present moment of performance.

In this chapter I have shown the basis for discourse between the Meisner Technique and the performance works of Michael Kirby. Despite the divergent paradigms in which they operated, Kirby embraces realism, and in particular realistic acting in his works. Kirby's pursuit of 'film acting' is one facet of his work that might connect to the Meisner Technique as the latter is often said to be particularly suited to this mode of performance (Shirley, 2010: 204).

Our exploration of *First Signs of Decadence* illustrated that Kirby's opposition of realistic conventions to formal structure strongly echoes Meisner's coordination of the reality of doing to serve the needs of the demands of modern, realist theatre. Kirby's work lays these two imperatives incongruously on top of one another in order to throw both frameworks into question and make the resolution of a singular meaning unstable, while Meisner instigates processes that make one serve the needs of the other in order to make a coherent reading by the audience possible. In the case of *Double Gothic* however, other potential sites of discourse between the Meisner Technique and the performance practices of Michael Kirby are highlighted. For example, outside of *First Signs of Decadence*, Kirby claims that the actor need not be aware of the structure of the performance in the moment of performance. This resonates strongly with the Meisner Technique's dismissal of character from the actor's perception in the moment of performance – in both cases structural aspects of the performance are put beyond the actor's perception when performing. This further resonates with my argument that the Meisner Technique operates according to a subjective ethical dimension based on the 'face-to-face' encounter with The Other that does not require objective, moral judgements to be made. The discourse between the processes of the Meisner Technique and Michael Kirby's performance work arise from the resonances I identify here, combined with the substantive distinctions between them.

Ultimately, Kirby saw Structuralism as kind of provocation that he hoped would inspire other companies to approach structural issues of performance and create new works from them (Kirby, 1987: xix). Such an invitation justifies my approach to find the basis on which disparate

practices can be brought into discourse with one another. It is by bringing performance practices together and finding the ways that they are able to reinvigorate one another that we are able to see the greater relevance and power of each of these traditions.

# Robert Wilson

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Wilson is the third of the ‘New Theater’ practitioners whose work I am drawing into dialogue with the processes of the Meisner Technique. The feature of Wilson’s work that so sharply distinguishes it from other practitioners is its aesthetic as a ‘theatre of visions’, a form of performance aimed at the right brain (Brecht, 1994: 10). In Wilson’s early life he was plagued by a speech impediment that he was only able to overcome with the help of the dancer, Mrs Byrd Hoffman. He went on to work with brain-damaged children, applying his own version of the techniques that Mrs Hoffman had taught him (Brecht, 1994: 13). Later he furthered his explorations through psycho-somatic therapy with adults. In his early twenties he developed this work into theatre pieces that expressed an idiosyncratic aesthetic (Brecht, 1994: 30).

In relation to the processes instigated by the Meisner Technique, it is particularly interesting to examine Wilson’s relationship with his performers who were recruited from amongst his friends. Similarly to Foreman, these friends were not accomplished performers, and often suffered from a number of disabilities that Foreman engaged with through Hoffman’s techniques (Brecht, 1994: 47). The performers were given simple actions to perform, or sometimes they were instructed to do nothing at all. Occasionally they were told to dress up in a specific way in order to represent a particular person or object, but they were not required to represent this entity to the audience in a realistic fashion (*ibid*).

Stefan Brecht notes one moment from *Deafman Glance* in which he perceives the overly realistic acting of the performer representing a waiter being detrimental to the aesthetic that Wilson was attempting to create:

*Maurice Blanc is too busy. The naturalism of the professional actor crowds his performance with insignificant detail attesting only to his identification with his role. The local disturbance shatters the totality (continuity) in space and time aimed at by Wilson and unbalances Wilson’s gradations of emphasis within this totality.’*

(Brecht, 1994: 60)

This last observation, that realistic acting is detrimental to Wilson's 'Theatre of Visions', is especially relevant in relation to Meisner who trained his students to actualise realistic performances. This suggests one area (of many) on which the two practitioners significantly diverged. I highlight this issue here to avoid the suspicion that I am attempting to conflate the two working practices.

Wilson is different from both Foreman and Kirby, but the three are united by the suspicion they cast upon the assumption that a singular, unified meaning inheres within an artwork. Wilson does not, however, reject the appearance of meaning, but deliberately employs a wide range of culturally weighty images. For example, in *Deafman Glance*, among the diverse images presented are ritualistic child murder, blackface, and a stage magic act. Each image carries with it a host of potential meanings, many of which are emotionally and politically significant. However, because the images are never explained, and each is layered on top of another, their meaning cannot be resolved. Similarly to Kirby meaning is suggested, but continually held in abeyance and frustrated. Just as Kirby uses the combination of realist conventions and formal structure to destabilise the meaning suggested by either, Wilson is layering and pacing culturally significant images to simultaneously point towards meaning and prevent that meaning from being resolved in any single interpretation.

Just as in Foreman, Wilson's performers are not privy to any secret meaning that Wilson might have intended, but rather are instructed to simply do the actions precisely as he dictates. For example, Sutton's account of her work in *Deafman Glance* illustrates that she is aware of the potential readings of her performance but is not compelled to prioritise any one of them. She says, 'There are so many paradoxes, it's hard to define or delineate what you see. That's what makes it rich' (Sutton in Shyer, 1989: 7). Once again this carries a strong resonance to phenomenology, forcing the performer to focus their attention on the act of performing the score given to them and, just as in Foreman and Meisner, this activates the performer's direct perception of the world.

Although I am in no way suggesting that the work created by the Meisner Technique and Robert Wilson is the same, Wilson's work echoes Meisner's by separating the significance that the images created hold for the audience from the intention with which the performer creates them. Through Meisner's Technique of acting, the performer is given a way to actualise a spontaneous stream of instinctive behaviour in such a way that the audience of their performance is able to construct a unified meaning from it. In Wilson's work, the actor performs a prescribed score of conscious and deliberate actions in such a way as to suggest such meanings, but to ultimately put them beyond the audience's reach. In doing so, Wilson is extending Meisner's separation of the actors' actions and the meaning that the audience constructs from them to the extent that such constructions become untenable. This is another example of the way the features of the Meisner Technique resonate with and echo through some examples of postmodern performance in ways that call into question the conventions of modern, realist theatre. The undeniable differences between the Meisner Technique and this postmodern practice allow such resonances create the basis for discourse between the respective practices.

In Wilson, an added element of complication is the attention he draws to the speed at which actions are performed. For example, Sutton, in the prologue of *Deafman Glance* has a relatively short score of physical actions to perform, but draws this out over about forty-five minutes in 'extreme slow motion' (Holmberg, 1997: 4). By requiring his performers to execute everyday actions at the slowest possible speed, an extra-daily effort and attention is necessarily engaged. By teasing out the nearly automatic muscle memory of everyday actions into a slowly executed and deliberate score, Wilson increases the level of engagement required to perform them.

A second strategy that Wilson employs in order to alter the relationship between the performer and their actions is repetition, such as the accumulation dance that Lucinda Childs performs in *Einstein on the Beach*. By the virtue of fact that she repeats the actions of this

dance that have already accumulated before adding a new movement to the sequence, her relationship with each movement is never resolved and put safely into the past. At various times in the course of the dance, her movements exists for her in her past, her present, and her future, and sometimes simultaneously in all three of these temporal categories. Also, every time she adds a new movement to the sequence, the sequence as a whole is altered, and what may have been complete (and suggestive of unity) on a previous repetition is now only a partial iteration of the new sequence. This continual displacement of resolution questions whether the sequence is ever complete, or complete-able.

Both the manipulation of the speed at which actions are performed and the repetition of actions emphasise the performers' relationship to these actions and questions whether any singular meaning, narrative or unity may be read from them. As with Wilson's technique of layering the culturally significant images on top of one another and separating their cultural meaning from the intention of the performer, by manipulating the performer's relationship with their actions through varying the pace at which they are performed and engaging with them through repetitious sequences of behaviour, Wilson is extending the separation of the performer's intentions from the interpretation of the audience to the point at which the possibility of stabilising or resolving this meaning is called into question. The separation of the actors' intention from the audience's interpretation of their actions that Wilson plays with through the above strategies is a feature that we have repeatedly observed in Meisner's Technique. This is therefore one more instance where the concerns and techniques of Meisner's acting methodology ripple through the paradigms of performance that followed and challenged the one that it was originally employed to actualise. As such, this is another point where discourse is possible.

A further fundamental process that Meisner and Wilson share is described by Stefan Brecht in the case of Wilson as the, 'epiphany of the performer's individuality' (Brecht, 1994: 27). As we have noted above, the Meisner Technique and Wilson's working processes provide distinct

performative methodologies that result in greatly divergent productions. However, in their very different ways, both could be said to be striving towards the fullest possible expression of their performers' individuality. Meisner claims that most of his work is to bring his students together with themselves, because that is the route to creative acting (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 160). Wilson, through his workshops and his direction of disabled performers sought to celebrate their individuality within the structure of his performances. Brecht notes that it is, 'Wilson's genius,' that accepts his performer's, 'painful impotence', and, 'transmutes it into the grace and dignity of an individuality as it is' (Brecht, 1994: 201).

All of the above points of intersection show how Wilson and the Meisner Technique are able to enter into a productive discourse that is able to cast light upon the working processes of each. It is the unique combination of wildly different endeavours that still retain instances of resemblance that allows this discourse to be established. Accordingly, I would like to begin such a discourse with Stefan Brecht's observation that the naturalistic acting of Maurice Blanc in Wilson's production of *Deafman Glance* is disruptive to the 'totality (continuity)' of Wilson's overall aesthetic. Brecht notes here that Blanc's performance is too cluttered with realistic detail that portrays nothing beyond the actor's identification with their role. Such a criticism cuts at the heart of the connection between Method styles of acting and the modern, realist paradigm for which they were primarily put into service. The conclusion that Brecht suggests here is that naturalistic acting should not be used in Wilson's production because it disrupts the totality/continuity of the production. This might be seen to be disrupting the flow of images through which Wilson is affecting the 'right brain' of the audience. Wilson presents a succession of images which are layered upon one another and manipulated to evoke a visceral response from the audience without recourse to their narrative and logical sensibilities. Therefore, when an element of one of the images, in this case Blanc playing the role of a waiter, steps beyond the bounds of the image that it presents and seeks to assert a realistic reality on the space around it, it will interfere with this succession and deliberate layering of images.

As Meisner notes in an interview with Paul Gray, the basis of his acting methodology need not be abandoned in the production of non-realist works because, 'An actor whose craft is securely rooted in the ability to live truthfully, under the imaginary circumstances of the play can perform in any style' (Meisner in Gray, 1964: 155). The crucial wording in this statement, as I note in Chapter Five, is that it is the ability to live truthfully, under the imaginary circumstances of *the play*, because this extends the imaginary circumstances beyond the fictional reality of the intended representation and into the structural elements of the production, including aesthetic and stylistic choices. The significance of this in the context of Brecht's criticism of Blanc's performance is that an actor performing according to the Meisner Technique need not clutter their performance with naturalistic detail and therefore disrupt the totality of Wilson's aesthetic. This is because restraint and certain qualities of movement can be included within the imaginary circumstances of the play that the actor lives in accordance with.

An example of this process at work within the Meisner Technique is the work with particularisations which Meisner claims are those elements of a performance that the actor works out in rehearsal and then remain constant for all subsequent performances and give shape to their performance. The application of this technique to Blanc's performance would provide a way to rid it of its distracting naturalistic detail. For instance, if he were to treat the task of bringing plates to the table *as if* they were full of highly precious and fragile treasures, it might focus his attention more tightly on the task at hand rather than giving him space to indulge in excessive naturalistic detail. Such a suggestion is a hypothetical proposal and in rehearsal the actions could be worked on with a range of particularisations until the quality of action that best serves Wilson's aesthetic is produced. The pertinent fact is that the Meisner Technique would furnish an actor with tools through which they could avoid Brecht's criticism and serve Wilson's aesthetic appropriately.

Just as the Meisner Technique shows one route to achieve the particular aesthetic that Wilson's productions presented, Wilson's work would seem to offer the Meisner Technique a

range of unique acting challenges that would push it far beyond the bounds of the modern, realist theatre that it originally served. Because Wilson's work centres around the particular deployment of images, and the human being is often used as a key element of these images, it demands a very sensitive and precise deployment of the performer's engagement with reality. For example, the physical score that Sutton performs near the beginning of *Deafman Glance* in which she ritually murders children over the space of forty-five minutes in extreme slow motion, makes a number of significant demands upon the performer. Firstly there is the extreme slow motion that the actor must move with, and secondly there is the unemotional or ritualistic stabbing of the children. By accepting the imaginary circumstance of extreme slow motion the Meisner actor is able to stretch their technique to meet this requirement. The ritualistic or unemotional quality that the performance demands is a perfect scenario for the application of a particularisation. Rather than seeing their actions as necessarily the same actions that are represented to the audience, the actor is able to perform the physical score necessary for the representation *as if* it is any other action that is more conducive to the quality that the aesthetic demands. For example, if they were to perform the stabbings as if they were scattering their father's ashes, or as if they were putting the final touches to a child's birthday cake, we can see the potential malleability of the stream of behaviour that the Meisner actor is able to exhibit to the audience.

Although this may appear to be a simple answer to a complex comparison of widely divergent paradigms of performance, this is significant for the Meisner Technique because this potential deployment of it shows the truth of Meisner's assertion that the actor who is trained to live truthfully according to the imaginary circumstances is in no way limited to naturalism. Furthermore it shows that such an actor is not just equipped for other realistic performances of the sort that mainstream screen acting requires, but is well placed to craft performances in paradigms of performance worlds away from that in which it was originally used. Stepping back from the specific examples of Maurice Blanc's role of the waiter and Sutton's slow-motion child murders to the wider interaction of performers within Wilson's productions is

where we see the dynamics the Meisner Technique instigate become especially productive and interesting. The specific ways in which the performers in Wilson's works are supposed to interact (or not interact) call for particular relationships and extensions of reality that must be tailored by each participant.

In *The Life and Times of Sigmund Freud* Maurice Sondak, in the title role, was instructed not to interact with the host of images that were presented around him (Brecht, 1994: 48). This is a prime example of the way that the people who populate Wilson's images are restricted from their engagement with the other images that they may share the stage with. As part of Wilson's aesthetic it is important that the images are kept separate so that they may be juxtaposed in the particular ways that Wilson sees fit. However, such a demand means that the performer is not allowed to react to their real environment in such a way as the Meisner Technique would normally require. It is in just such a situation as this that the Meisner Technique's ability to shape the actor's engagement with reality is especially useful. Through the use of particularisations the Meisner actor is able to craft their behaviour to such an extent that they are able to deliberately select the outer boundaries of the environment that they choose to relate to. In this way they would be able to confine themselves within the particular images that they are asked to inhabit by Wilson's aesthetic.

Michael Kirby notes how Wilson uses the entrances and exits of characters to structure his performances (Kirby, 1976: 54). However, as we see in the above example, Wilson's technique of juxtaposing images goes beyond the Structuralist principle of bringing the structure of performance to the front of other aspects of performance. For Wilson the structuring of images is a way to directly affect the 'right brain' of his audience and therefore, rather than highlighting the structure of his performance, they allow the structure to become the performance. This brings out a strong connection between Robert Wilson and Michael Kirby in that they both saw that it is in the perception of the audience members that their artwork is manifested. In Wilson's case, by bypassing the logical and narrative faculties of his audience

he seeks to affect the audience's perception in a visceral manner. In doing this, Wilson is effectively recanting an objective standpoint on his work and attempting to work directly with the subjective perception of his audience members. This is a parallel aspiration to Kirby's desire to create structures within the 'mind' of the audience by manipulating the theatre space. Such approaches are strongly reminiscent of the phenomenological theories that we have cited in this work. As the Meisner Technique is functioning in this dimension as well, the resonances that we have noted between the working processes of these practices are not surprising.

The performers of both the Meisner Technique and Robert Wilson are required to interact with their environment, each other, and their actions in very specific ways. The foundation of the Meisner Technique, as we have seen in the first three chapters of this work, exploits these connections and provides the actors with specific tools and processes through which they can manipulate them. Thus, when the aesthetic of the production calls for each performer or group of performers to have conflicting realities and relationships with one another, the Meisner Technique is uniquely suited to craft such performances. The performers may not be reacting to their environment, the other performers, and their actions in the same way as they would in a modern, realist theatre piece, but these connections are still very strong and it is these that the Meisner Technique deliberately fosters and allows the actor to manipulate. For this reason, Wilson's works show that the Meisner Technique is in no way tied to the modern, realist theatre that it originally served. In this instance of discourse we can see that each practice adds to our understanding of the other and, although they are substantively different, when they are drawn into discourse rather than isolated by ideological difference they are mutually strengthened and invigorated.

# Conclusion

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In this work I have investigated the phenomenal relationships that an actor practising the Meisner Technique establishes with their environment, other actors and their actions. When seen from the phenomenological perspectives that I have employed in this study, it becomes apparent that the Meisner Technique depends upon subjective perspective rather than objective rules or facts. This has established that Meisner's actor training is a process of orientation that enables the actor to manipulate their perception of reality in ways that allow them to perform according to the conventions of modern, realist theatre. However, the instinctive engagement with spontaneous action that gives the actors access to the particular 'reality of doing' that Meisner claims as the 'foundation of acting' does not neatly fit with the conventions of modern, realist theatre that he was using it to actualise. In fact, in order to fulfil particular conventions of this paradigm of theatre, it was necessary for Meisner to adapt aspects of his actors' engagement with reality that he had trained them to develop. What is particularly interesting is that the instinctive basis of the Meisner Technique incorporates processes and dynamics that have significant resonances with the preoccupations of certain postmodern performance practitioners. This analysis shows us that because of the phenomenologically-aligned principles that orient Meisner's students to a particular engagement with reality, his technique is not wholly encompassed by the particular paradigm of theatre that he was working within, but instead creates continuities between divergent paradigms of theatre/performance.

Our description of the Meisner actor's relationship with their environment through an analysis of the observation exercises in Chapter One led to a number of conclusions. Firstly, although we found a number of convergences between Meisner's training and phenomenological perspectives, we also noted that they are not perfectly aligned and therefore do not collapse into one another. We discovered that in the actor's grasp of their immediate, concrete

environment, their particular perspective on the world through their body, that Husserl calls the ‘zero-point of perception’, is emphasised. Through Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of the ‘unity of perception’ and the integrity of ‘the intentional arc’, we found that the emotional and abstract aspects of the actor’s encounter with the world are integrated with their grasp of the concrete material world around them to the extent that these aspects of experience are inseparable.

As we have seen, for the majority of the early stages of Meisner’s training programme (what we might classify as the pre-performative element of his Technique) the actors work in pairs and, as Meisner’s principle of ‘the pinch and the ouch’ makes clear, it is the interaction between them that is the focus of the exercises. The ‘pinch and the ouch’ consists of two guidelines: “*Don’t do anything unless something happens to make you do it.*” That’s one of them. The second is: “*What you do doesn’t depend on you; it depends on the other fellow*” (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 34, emphasis in original). It is therefore apparent that the relationship between the actors is a vital aspect of the Meisner Technique’s operation, and we analysed this in Chapter Two, particularly as it is established through Meisner’s Repetition exercise. Here I traced through the progressive stages of the exercise, from ‘Mechanical Repetition’, through, ‘Repetition from Your Own Point of View’, ‘Impulsive Changes’, ‘The Three Moment Exercise’, and ‘Meaningful Moment to Meaningful Moment’. I applied the contrasting perspectives of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas to each of these stages in order to build up a spectrum of interpretations of the dynamic that is created by each of them.

According to Merleau-Ponty, the encounter with another person offers the opportunity for true communication to occur in order to confer, ‘intersubjective being, or in other words ... objectivity’, upon the objects that the subject perceives (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 18). However, one person is never able to completely occupy the perspective of another, something that Merleau-Ponty explains by saying, ‘I will never know how you see red, and you will never know how I see it; but this separation of consciousness is recognized only after failure of

communication, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us...' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 17). It is this separation of consciousness that means that, from Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the Repetition exercise represents a continual and futile attempt to occupy the perspective of The Other. One consequence of this interpretation of the Repetition exercise is that resolution is impossible, meaning that each step of the exercise provokes the next, creating a self-sustaining dynamic in which the exercise could continue indefinitely, based upon the pursuit of, and failure to achieve, ideal communication.

The second perspective on the encounter of The Other that I apply to the Repetition exercise is that of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas' discussion of encountering The Other is central to his rejection of totalising frameworks of knowledge. From ontology, the discipline that Merleau-Ponty practices, Levinas moves the discussion into the realm of ethics; he does not discuss what exists in the world, but how people should act. Levinas asserts that The Other transcends our perception of them, and that we must respect this transcendence. When applied to the Repetition exercise, we saw that by focusing on each other's behaviour and allowing the dialogue to change according to their impulses, the students bring the alterity of The Other to the foreground of their perception and directly shape their own behaviour and perspective according to it. They do not, and cannot, capture the whole of the other person within their perception, but by fixing their attention on the absolute otherness that an encounter with The Other presents them with, they force themselves into constant contact with that which escapes them. This destabilises their identity and removes the potential for them to *be* anything in the face of The Other. This is a direct demonstration of each student using the encounter with The Other in order to shape their perception of the world in such a way as to deny themselves of being and to thrust themselves into the flow of action.

These contrasting perspectives on the dynamic at the heart of the Repetition exercise allow us distinct interpretations of how the exercise is operating and the phenomenal consequences of this. Crucially, where these readings coincide, they indicate that it is the relationship between

the actors that provides the exercise with the impetus to continue. Therefore, from each perspective, the Repetition exercise allows the actors to behave spontaneously and instinctively in relation to one another before any consideration of representation for an audience enters the picture.

In Chapter Three I discussed the relationship between Meisner's students and their actions through an analysis of The Independent Activity exercise. In this I teased out the four rules (both explicit and implicit) that govern the unfolding dynamic: the selected activity must be difficult, but the actor must have some ability to perform it, they must also have a reason why they need to perform it, and it must be done urgently (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39, 49, 54). The requirement that the actor have some level of skill or ability to perform the activity means that they enact a familiar action on stage and, from Merleau-Ponty's perspective, this means that they bring their own personal perspective of the world on to the stage. Because of Merleau-Ponty's theories of the unity of perception and the intentional arc, the perspective that the actor brings with them encapsulates both the physical and emotional dimensions of their experience. The personal significance of the action is also emphasised by the reason the actor invents to perform the activity. We looked at Meisner's directive that the activity be difficult through Heidegger's theory of obstinacy that explores what happens when something interrupts the transparent coping that one is able to enter into when performing a familiar action. According to Heidegger's account, this disruption overturns the limiting of spontaneity that Merleau-Ponty identified taking place in the execution of familiar activities. Furthermore, this difficulty also forces the actor to focus more narrowly on the performance of the activity, leaving less attention available to consider those human concerns that lie outside its bounds. The actors' focus is further limited when they add urgency to their 'reason why'. When we consider Heidegger's discussion of the converging flow of purpose that 'chains of significance' represent, we can see that this limiting of focus effectively seals off the actors' ultimate for-the-sake-of, potentially to *be* a good actor, into a compartment of their awareness that is separated from their immediate consciousness. This tunes the actor's attention into the

specific requirements demanded of them by the particular mode of performance they are actualising and prevents them from becoming self-conscious as they perform.

I then proceeded to discuss how this relationship between the actor and their actions affects the dynamic established between two actors that I laid out in Chapter Two. I noted how the person performing the activity is forced to relate to their partner in a more spontaneous manner, intensifying the dynamic between the actors performing the Repetition exercise from the perspectives of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. This is borne out by the observation from *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, that under these conditions, ‘there are more impulsive shifts in its direction, more surprises’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 39). The actor’s relationship to action is therefore another way that Meisner encourages his actors to harness their being-in-the-world in order to craft a performance out of ‘the reality of doing’. This particular aspect of the actor’s experience builds upon, and is affected by, the way they relate to their environment as a whole, and the other actors they engage with.

Having established this tripartite picture of the Meisner actor’s way of relating to the world when performing, in Chapter Four we investigated how these relationships are harnessed by the actor in order to perform modern, realist theatre. Despite the historical coincidence of Meisner with this mode of performance, and the common understanding of his Technique as being a branch of Method Acting, we saw that there are a number of tensions between this paradigm of theatre and the instinctive foundation that Meisner builds up through his training. The first particular convention of this mode of theatre that Meisner adapts his Technique in order to satisfy is the unity of character that depends upon a fictional reality that extends beyond the spatial and temporal location of the scene that is performed. Meisner teaches his students to adapt to this facet of modern, realist theatre with the tool of Emotional Preparation. This is distinct from Strasberg’s (and early Stanislavsky’s) device of ‘emotion memory’ in that it utilises imagination rather than memory, and is engaged in before a scene begins rather than while it is performed. Another feature of this mode of performance that

Meisner is forced to address directly is the recitation of a pre-written text. Meisner overcomes this difficulty by insisting that the actors learn the lines by rote and casually, a process that strips the words of their meaning. When the scene is rehearsed, the actors are asked to pick up on the impulses that they feel, and at this point the meaning of the words, having been rooted in the personal perspective of the actor, comes back into play. The integrity of the text is maintained because the habitual relationship the actor has built up with their cues through the mechanical rote-learning of the lines encourages them to naturally wait for their cue to speak while still taking their impulses as their primary cause to speak. The final convention of modern, realist theatre that requires Meisner to make alterations to his training programme is that the actor should represent a fictional character to the audience. In this instance Meisner applies Stanislavsky's tool of particularisation through which the actor learns to treat certain aspects of their perception as if they were others. This process involves the direct use of the actor's personal grasp of the world to craft a performance for an audience. The actor's behaviour from their own perspective may be quite different (in its causes and intentions) to the behaviour the audience reads as that of the fictional character, despite them being based on what might empirically be seen as the same physical actions. Meisner also equips his students with the Spoon River exercise through which they are trained to gradually bring their perspective into line with the character they are representing to the audience. This exercise instigates a process of reading the lines, emotionally preparing, and improvising with more and more elements of the text incorporated into each successive rendition. This allows the Meisner actor, who has otherwise based their performance on their reactions to their fellow actor, to perform solo script work where their range of potential action is strictly limited to a recitation of the text.

In the fifth chapter I set out certain strands of the postmodern field that resonate with the processes that the Meisner Technique instigates. In the first step of this demonstration I dispelled the myth that Meisner is simply a variation of Strasberg's Method Acting and as such necessarily tied to the production of modern, realist theatre. I then showed how the

indeterminacy present at the heart of the Meisner Technique parallels John Cage's (specifically Buddhist) pursuit of indeterminacy. I went on to note the synergies that Meisner's 'reality of doing' has with and George Maciunas' three principles of 'concretism'. I also noted how these qualities of the Meisner Technique form part of the wider challenge to the authority of the author that is a significant preoccupation of poststructuralist theories and the postmodern field.

It is where the preoccupations of these postmodern artists cross over into the realm of theatre/performance that the resonances with Meisner become sharp and distinct. To explore this transmission I traced some of the concerns of George Foreman, Michael Kirby, and Robert Wilson over chapters Six, Seven, and Eight. In each instance I highlighted the plurality of practices and the individual nature of the works in question at the same time as I drew them into discourse with the processes involved in the Meisner Technique.

In Foreman's practices of forcing every participant in his performance events (writer, performer, and audience) to consider the act of perception itself rather than the content of that perception, we can see how he parallels Meisner's desire for the actor to react directly to what they perceive, and disperses this throughout the performance event. With reference to Foreman's invitation for others to create plays from his notebooks, I suggested the opening of a discourse between his work and the processes of the Meisner Technique.

Kirby's juxtaposition of realistic conventions and formal structure mirrors Meisner's coordination of the reality of doing to serve the demands of modern, realist theatre. Kirby's work plays these two imperatives off against one another in order to throw both frameworks into question and make the resolution of a singular meaning unstable, while Meisner finds strategies to make one serve the needs of the other in order to allow the audience to make a coherent reading. I discussed the connections that are created by both practitioners' association with realism and set this against their different attitude to the individual's relationship to structure in the opening of a discourse between the two working practices.

Wilson's method of layering culturally weighty images on top of one another that points towards, yet simultaneously frustrates, the resolution of meaning is a strong echo of Meisner's process of layering a fictional circumstance on top of the real acts of the actor in order to allow the audience to create such a unified meaning. Furthermore, Wilson's manipulation of the pace of everyday actions and his repetitious scores force a fresh consideration of the experience of these actions. Such a tactic resonates with Meisner's focus on the reality of doing, and magnifies it so that the action is made strange and encountered afresh. While these theoretical connections do not suggest a direct transmission or influence between the practitioners, they do force a reconsideration of the Meisner Technique's relevance beyond the paradigm of theatre it has traditionally been associated with. In the opening stages of a discourse between the processes of the Meisner Technique and Robert Wilson I suggested how the tools of the Meisner Technique are particularly suited to meet the needs of Wilson's aesthetic. The way that the Meisner Technique allows the actor to shape their engagement with reality is able to overcome Stefan Brecht's criticism of the naturalistic actor within Wilson's productions and therefore might lead to a fruitful collaboration and exchange.

There are a number of conclusions that emerge from these analyses. The first, and perhaps most tangible of these, is a fresh consideration of Meisner's place and significance within the history of Twentieth Century Theatre/Performance. Despite the fact that Meisner was a part of the narrative of Stanislavsky's influence on Twentieth Century theatre, we have seen through our analyses of the actors' relationship with their environment, other people, and their actions, the challenges that the paradigm of modern, realist theatre poses it, and the resonances that it has with certain strands of postmodern performance, that it is not wholly circumscribed by the traditional image of Method Acting. Rather, the phenomenologically-aligned principles that we saw underpinning Meisner's Technique in the first three chapters allow it to surpass the paradigm of theatre that it originally operated within. In Chapter Four we saw how the phenomenal relationships are manipulated in order that the Technique can still support the enterprise of modern, realist theatre, and in chapters Five through Eight we

demonstrated how these underlying processes resonate within traditions of postmodern art, and in particular, how these concerns re-enter the performance tradition in the works of Richard Foreman, Michael Kirby, and Robert Wilson.

The particular relationships that Meisner's Technique has with the divergent paradigms of modern, realist theatre and postmodern performance then suggests the second significant outcome of my study – the possibility of a new perspective upon these paradigms of performance. Because the Meisner Technique establishes a particular relationship with each of the paradigms, and with each of the particular and distinct practitioners within the postmodern paradigm, we can use this perspective to look in unique ways at each of them. In the case of modern, realist theatre we can assert that there is more complexity operating in the actual performance of this mode of performance, as opposed to the literary works these performances are based on, than might otherwise have been suspected. In the case of postmodern performance, Meisner's resonance with particular aspects of certain practitioners highlights the strands of continuity that exist between them and a practitioner of modern, realist theatre. These continuities challenge the ways that we look at these fields of performance as distinct and oppositional according to models of paradigmatic dominance, rupture, and revolution where one worldview model holds sway until another attacks and displaces it. Rather, through the phenomenological analyses of elements of Meisner's Technique, we can look to traditions of performance that survive such ideological shifts.

This leads us to the third of the major outcomes of this study, the benefits of a phenomenological interpretation of theatre/performance studies as opposed to an objective standpoint. Throughout this work we have emphasised the important role that perspective plays in coming to an understanding of the actor's experience of the theatrical event. We have also touched on the other perspectives operating within the performance event, and in particular that of the audience. We have suggested that it is not the actor's 'self', nor the audience's interpretation of the work that define the theatrical event in isolation, but the

engaged action that allow both of these entities to be constructed that is the crucial element. To underestimate the importance of perspective in these processes, as non-phenomenological approaches might, is to ignore a considerable amount of underlying complexity. My assertion here connects strongly to Husserl's foundation of phenomenology as a challenge to the 'natural attitude' that some natural sciences encourage. This 'natural attitude' is also in evidence in some phenomenological studies of theatre and has the potential to blunt the precision of the arguments that they present. A prominent example of this is Bert O. States' foundational work of theatre phenomenology, *Great Reckonings in Small Rooms*. States admits to constructing his analysis 'from an audience seat in [his] mind's eye' (States, 1985: 14), an abstract, constructed perspective that misses the reality of the real perspectives of specific participants in the theatrical event. All of this suggests that there is much more work to be done, and many fruitful discoveries to be made in the phenomenological analysis of theatre/performance.

As I noted in the introduction, part of the motivation behind this project was to suggest connections between the Meisner Technique that I was trained in and postmodern performance. As I illustrated in the chapters on Foreman, Kirby, and Wilson, there are a number of such connections that might benefit from further exploration within a 'practice as research' context. I would firstly suggest the collation of a script from Foreman's published notebooks in the manner in which Foreman invites, and the performance of this using the tools established by the Meisner Technique. Secondly I would suggest that the Meisner Technique be applied to a production of *First Signs of Decadence*, by Michael Kirby as he states that this is one of the hardest plays to act that he knows of. The ability of the Meisner Technique to create realistic performances coupled with its tools to shape the performer's engagement in such a way as to accept the arbitrary imperatives imposed by Kirby's structure would suggest that this might be a particularly fertile collaboration of aesthetic and acting methodology. Finally, I would suggest that the Meisner Technique might be deployed in productions similar to those Wilson mounts where the actor is required to inhabit particular

images with limits and conditions attached to them. Such a production, as I suggest in Chapter Eight, would test the outer boundaries of what the Meisner Technique is able to support. These suggested projects are entirely hypothetical and would require detailed planning and further research in order to be executed, but with this work I have shown that at a theoretical level there might be many discoveries possible within such ventures.

One particular area for further study might be the phenomenological analyses of performance and consciousness. I have presented one example of such research in Chapter Three through my exploration of the Meisner actor's relationship to their actions through The Independent Activity exercise. Here we discovered the creation of a 'hidden compartment' in the actor's consciousness through the accumulation of particular qualities of actions that exist in a state of tension in relation to one another and thereby affect the actor's consciousness. Such an example barely touches on the power of phenomenological approaches to analyse the consciousness of participants in performance events, and might just as readily provide fresh insights into the consciousness of audience members as it does to the consciousness of the actor in this study.

One additional outcome of this work relates to the underlying frameworks of interpretation that it has been conducted within. By overtly applying phenomenological arguments to the study of theatre/performance, I have been participating within the discourse of Performance and Philosophy. Rather than works of literature, and the performances that are based upon them, being taken as the demonstration of philosophical theories, Performance and Philosophy is now turning its attention to the ways in which theatre/performance creates its own ways of seeing the world (Cull, 2010: 1). Rather than demonstrating pre-established philosophical principles, performance can now be seen to challenge such propositions. This more equitable relationship between the two disciplines makes possible a new level of discourse that enables a new range of interdisciplinary approaches. This work has been one example of such an interdisciplinary approach and has shown fresh perspectives that can be

offered on phenomenological theories by their deployment in the analysis of particular theatrical practices. For instance, this work has foregrounded the tendency of Merleau-Ponty's theories to minimise the alterity of The Other in its quest to establish objectivity, and the subjective nature of Levinas' transcendental ethics that do not operate in the same dimension as abstract, moral judgement. However, this new field is yet to be fully chartered and may therefore offer any number of future analyses, challenges, and collaborations.

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