

Acting, Anxiety and Authenticity: Performing Affective Labour in Nathan Fielder's *The Rehearsal* (2022)

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Abstract

This article investigates ways of performing affective labour as presented in the docu-comedy series *The Rehearsal* by Nathan Fielder. In reading *The Rehearsal* through the lens of affective labour, this article examines in what ways the cultural and economic value placed on performing authentic emotion has become a cause for anxiety in and around the modern workplace. Throughout the show, Nathan attempts to manage other's emotions, as well as his own; but he constantly doubts whether the moments of intimacy he is creating are truly authentic. The show illustrates the feelings of alienation that come with the commercialisation of affect and the breaking down of divisions between the public and the private. The show uses the *mise-en-scène* to create an alienation effect (as conceptualised by Brecht), causing the viewer to question where the line between real and artificial lies. Fielder's show creates an environment reflective of neoliberal labour markets, in which there is no exteriority to work. This problematises the possibility to return to an authentic subjectivity outside the labouring self.

Keywords: Alienation, Affective Labour, Deep Acting, *The Rehearsal*, Alienation Effect.

Introduction

“We’re like a family” is an infamous marketing strategy many companies use to convince potential new employees that they foster a work culture of respect, care, and empathy. The widespread use of this metaphor illustrates how integral fostering social relations has become in modern work relations. Employers are encouraged to form emotional attachments to their work. In recent years, the consensus has become that this type of emotional attachment makes the worker vulnerable to exploitation and that recreating a family structure at work does not yield desirable results for employees.¹ But what if your work was to create a simulation of family life? This is the absurd scenario that *The Rehearsal* (2022), a docu-comedy written and directed by comedian Nathan Fielder, present its audience with.

The show's premise is that Fielder helps participants to rehearse for social situations they feel nervous about, by creating elaborate set pieces to emulate real places, hiring actors to pretend to be the friends or family of the participants and “rehearsing” for the situation until they are satisfied with the outcome. In the show, Fielder plays a fictionalised version of himself, which I will be referring to as Nathan. Throughout the course of the show, Nathan's obsessive dedication to creating immersive experiences for the participants leads to ludicrous moments. The rehearsal this essay focuses on is established in episodes two to six, which trace Nathan assembling a false family life to help a woman named Angela decide if she is ready for

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¹ Joe Pinsker, ‘The Dark Side of Saying Work Is “Like a Family”’, *The Atlantic*, 16 February (2022). At: <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2022/02/work-actually-is-like-a-family/622813/>. Accessed 28/08/23.

motherhood. Over the course of the season, this rehearsal becomes the central narrative element of the show, as Nathan decides to join the rehearsal and acts out various scenes of fatherhood with the child actors hired to play Angela's and his son, Adam.

In his double role as actor and director on Angela's rehearsal, Nathan's work is to create an immersive, familial atmosphere. The social relations produced between Nathan, Angela and the actors hired to play Adam, simulate something which is deeply personal, a family life, but take place under the spectre of capital. Nathan does not bring his work home with him, instead he creates a home to work in. Throughout the show, Nathan attempts to immerse himself fully in the experiment he has created. However, he struggles to feel the right feelings required of him to perform his role authentically in the rehearsal. Nathan wants to create an authentic experience of parenthood for Angela and himself, but despite his best efforts, feels alienated from the life he creates.

This article proposes that Nathan's work of producing these rehearsals can be understood as affective labour.² By analysing the show using the concept of affective labour, insights can be gained into the strategies affective labourers can take on to create "authentic" affects within themselves and others; and how subjectivities are shaped at work. I posit that Nathan's feelings of anxiety are a consequence of the affective labour he does. The show illustrates the emotional precarity that comes with the commercialisation of affect and the breaking down of divisions between the public and the private.

Theory and Methodology

Philosopher Michael Hardt first argued that there is a new organisation of work under late capitalism, in which social relations have become "directly productive of capital" and that this affective labour has become "generalized through wide sectors of the economy".³ The concept of affective labour describes "the labor of human contact and interaction, which involves the production and manipulation of affects", meaning that work has appropriated social relations to produce value.⁴ As affective labourers (mostly employed in the service sector), workers "capacities to affect and become affected are transformed into assets, goods, services, and managerial strategies".⁵

The concept of affective labour implies that affects are not autonomic reactions, but are mediated by environments, histories, and expectations. Affect scholar Sara Ahmed defined affect as an "effect of the circulation between objects and signs".⁶ As affects circulate, they shape affective environments and are shaped by them in turn. Ahmed posits that subjects and the collective are shaped by how emotions flow or move between objects.⁷ This flow that shapes subjects and the collective functions in that sensations emerge as we come into contact with objects, and that these sensations become intensified. Only through our contact with an object

² In this article, I use the terms work and labour interchangeably to refer to waged and unwaged forms of productive activity. I do not draw the classical Marxist distinction between "work" as producing use value and "labour" as producing exchange value. Guillermina Altomonte, 'Affect & Labor', *Athenea Digital: Revista de Pensamiento e Investigación Social*, vol. 20, no. 2 (2020) p. 2.

³ Michael Hardt, 'Affective Labor', *Boundary 2*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1999), p. 97.

⁴ Johanna Oksala, 'Affective Labor and Feminist Politics', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 41, no. 2 (January 2016), p. 284.

⁵ Tanja Sihvonen et al., 'Affective Capitalism: Investments and Investigations', *Ephemera*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2016), p. 9.

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 45.

⁷ Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2004), p. 118, p. 128.

do we really know the object is there, as the object ‘surfaces’ or takes shape.⁸ Affects “produce the effect of surfaces and boundaries of bodies”,⁹ referring to both individual and collective bodies. The circulation of affects is manipulated for the sake of capital by affective labour.

Affects shape bodies and the perception of objects and signs. As affects are modified and adapted for work, work produces “not only commodities but also subjectivities”.¹⁰ In 1983, feminist sociologist Arlie Hochschild was the first to theorise that the modern worker’s emotions are for sale on commercial markets and have become a product for consumption. She further argues that the management and commercialisation of emotion encourages the experience of psychological strain in workers, experienced as the estrangement or alienation of the worker from the work they do and from aspects of their selves.¹¹ Hochschild’s theorisations of self-estrangement draw on Marx’s concept of the alienation of the worker from the products of their labour, which leads to feelings of self-estrangement for the worker.¹² The self-estrangement of the worker is arguably more intense when the worker’s social skills are involved in the production process and their emotions the products of their labour.

The work of affective labourers therefore crosses the boundaries between what is thought to be private and what is made public. Cultural scholars have used the term “intimate labour” to describe the forms of affective labour which require workers to take on an especially vulnerable positionality. In the introduction to their anthology on intimate labours, sociologists Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas define this type of work as one that “exposes personal information that would leave one vulnerable if others had access to such knowledge”.¹³ Examples of intimate labourers who might gain access to this type of intimate information include but are not limited to home health aides, hotel housekeepers, sex workers, or therapists. Nathan requires the actors on his show to enter equally intimate relations with the “primaries” they shadow. This intimate labour is certainly high stakes, as it makes both the labourer and the client (in this case the primaries they have randomly selected) vulnerable, for the sake of capital.

It is these theoretical insights that I base my close reading of *The Rehearsal* on. I find that examining this cultural object through the lens of affective labour allows insights into how the worker experiences the need to adapt their subjectivity for work. How does Nathan deal with the alienation and anxiety that comes with his affective labour? Are there affective stances which allow for an immersion in work without emotional strain?

To answer these questions, I use the concepts of affective and intimate labour to examine the text. I combine my analysis of the plot of *The Rehearsal* with a formal analysis of the mise-en-scene. I find that the use of formal techniques to alienate the viewer underline Nathan’s own experience of alienation throughout the show. The analysis begins with an outline of how *The Rehearsal* illustrates the marketisation of the domestic and makes visible the material efforts needed to produce affects. The show establishes authentic emotion as a valuable commodity, which Nathan feels he needs to create a successful rehearsal. *The Rehearsal* demonstrates the

⁸ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 24.

⁹ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 194.

¹⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 32.

¹¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 183.

¹² Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. Martin Milligan (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1988), pp. 75–80.

¹³ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas and Eileen Boris, ‘Introduction’, in *Intimate Labors* (Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 5.

breaking of the private, public sphere and the malleability of the subjectivity of the worker. Through its use of the aesthetics of alienation, the show upholds there is no authentic emotion to return to. The formal techniques used in the show to alienate the audience underline that Nathan cannot escape his own alienation and must rather strive for a different quality of experience.

The Behind-the-Scenes Production of Affects

First, I lay out how working subjectivities are created through the material conditions of the workplace that is Angela's rehearsal. The show makes explicit the labouring practices that go into producing affects, by showing the viewer “behind-the-scenes” footage of dressing areas, production rooms or filming the outside of sets which have been built for the show. The audience is also told details surrounding the production by Nathan through voice-over narration. The work that goes on “behind-the-scenes” to produce the rehearsals is very much part of the narrative arc. One moment of presenting the material work, featuring shots of the film crew, comes at the beginning of episode two, in which Angela’s rehearsal first becomes part of the narrative. Nathan is shown in a “behind-the-scenes” moment, watching the live footage of Angela in the farmhouse, filmed by surveillance cameras set up to document her rehearsal of motherhood (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. A child actor and their mother, watching the monitors with Nathan, ‘Scion’, 00:19.

Next to him is the unnamed mother of a child actor, holding her baby Charlie, who will be replacing the baby on the monitors to play Adam.¹⁴ Nathan becomes frenzied as the production team works to make Charlie look like the baby Angela interacts with.¹⁵ After Angela puts the Adam on-screen down for a nap, the swap can begin. Tense string orchestra music begins to play as Charlie is passed from his mother to a member of the production staff.¹⁶ Along with

¹⁴ ‘Scion’, *The Rehearsal* (HBO, July 22, 2022), 00:00-00:20.

¹⁵ ‘Scion’, *The Rehearsal*, 00:33- 00:38.

¹⁶ ‘Scion’, *The Rehearsal*, 00:54.

Nathan and Charlie's mother, we see four members of the crew setting up a ladder to climb into the baby's bedroom in the farmhouse and swap Charlie with the other baby over the surveillance monitors. The other baby Adam is returned to his waiting mother, the swap has been a success. Nathan praises his team before stepping outside the production room, opening the doors and stepping into the light as the string music swells.¹⁷ This opening sequence establishes the material labour that goes into creating an immersive experience of motherhood for Angela. The extra-diegetic music underlines the production of affects that Nathan and his team do as high-stakes work. Therefore, I argue that *The Rehearsal* is about the material conditions it takes to produce affects in others. While the results of affective labour may be intangible, the show makes visible the material labour and effort of affective labour that oftentimes remains invisible.

Further, the show can offer insights into how labouring subjectivities are produced at work. Later on in the same episode, we learn that the efforts to swap out the child actors were done out of legal necessity, as Oregon's labour laws state that babies may not work more than four hours per day.¹⁸ Most of the time, the babies who play Adam are shown sleeping, in a stroller or a car seat, unaware that they are performing labour in reproducing social relations and are creating surplus value; but the regulation from the governmental level nevertheless interpellates them as labouring subjects. The work of the babies is social reproduction or "the production of the forms of social cooperation on which accumulation depends".¹⁹ As affective labourers, their human contact and interaction has become a product. The social relations produced on the show create surplus value for production companies and broadcasting networks. Hardt and Negri write that in contemporary capitalism, capital exerts biopower by "regulating social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it".²⁰ *The Rehearsal* is a peculiar illustration of the marketisation of the domestic realm, since it literally reproduces familial life for a profit. Social reproduction is now located in the spheres of work, blurring the boundaries between private and public. The interpellation of the sleeping babies as working subjects makes explicit how far-reaching processes of accumulation and work have become in daily life.

The Fielder Method and Deep Acting

All the effort Nathan and his crew put into the rehearsal is to create an immersive experience for Angela. Nathan wants to create a situation which is as realistic as possible for his rehearsals, he sees this authenticity coming largely from the actors who participate in rehearsals: "During this process, I've discovered that an actor's sense of authenticity can vary vastly from one to another. And I wanted a way to create a standard for the level of realism I needed for this project".²¹ The following section outlines how this obsession with authenticity mirrors the transformation of intimacy and social relations into commodities on the labour market and how workers emotional investment is ensured through normative forms of control.

¹⁷ 'Scion', *The Rehearsal*, 01:55 – 2:02.

¹⁸ 'Scion', *The Rehearsal*, 05:20.

¹⁹ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 29.

²⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 23.

²¹ 'The Fielder Method', *The Rehearsal* (HBO, August 5, 2022), 01:33- 01:46.

In episode four, “The Fielder Method”, Nathan finds an acting school, to train actors for the express purpose of becoming a part of the crew of a rehearsal. For Nathan, it is important that workers present the right attitude to their work, he wants to train them on how to present the “level of realism” he requires of them. He hopes to achieve this by having the actors shadow unknowing primaries, with the goal of learning to emulate their primaries behaviours as authentically as possible. The *Rehearsal* presents a working environment which is highly specific and ludicrous in nature. Despite its bizarreness, Nathan’s high standards for his actors mirrors the modern workplace, where value is placed on “authentic” emotions, but these emotions are also deeply commodified.²² Qualities such as empathy and sociability are seen as valuable skills on the labour market.²³ Where this authenticity and realism stems from is never explained by Nathan, however he maintains that there is a right and wrong attitude to have regarding the work. The pressure in this workplace to perform your emotions as authentically as possible comes from Nathan, the director and boss of the show. In the Fielder method acting studio, Nathan introduces the stakes of their work:

Unlike a normal role where the worst thing that can happen is, you know, someone changes the channel if they don’t like your performance, you know what I mean. Like, with this show, if your performance isn’t accurate, you could ruin someone’s life.²⁴

Again, in this quotation, the stakes of the work shown on *The Rehearsal* are raised for comedic effect. However, the work that Nathan asks the actors in rehearsals to do is one that is deeply intimate, here, we see him acknowledging the vulnerability of those involved participating in rehearsals. The work of the rehearsal actors is to (re-)create private moments. To prepare for this, Nathan has them invading their primaries lives, to find out intimate details which might inform their performance without the primary’s knowledge. As the actor’s move into proximity with their primaries and are asked to develop an intimate understanding of their lives, emotional boundaries of what is private and what is public bleed into each other, leading to a confusion of relationships. Intimacy and vulnerability are part of the production process of the rehearsal. The show illustrates how human closeness becomes a commodity, leading to feelings of uneasiness in some of the actors.

The acting students’ work is that of entering intimate social relations, which they might wish to cognitively and emotionally distance themselves from. This is certainly true for Thomas, one of the students who admits to Nathan that he has some trepidations about the levels of intimacy he requires of his employees, describing the process of getting to know more about the primaries as “stalking”.²⁵ After this confrontation, Nathan decides to dress as Thomas and attempts to relive the workshop experience through his eyes. When he leaves the first session of the workshop, Nathan-dressed-as-Thomas is asked to sign an appearance release.²⁶

²² Cinzia Arruzza, ‘The Capitalism of Affects’, Public Seminar, 25 August (2014). At: <https://publicseminar.org/2014/08/the-capitalism-of-affects/>. Accessed 28/08/2023.

²³ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, p. 70.

²⁴ ‘The Fielder Method’, *The Rehearsal* (HBO, August 5, 2022), 02:05-02:17.

²⁵ ‘The Fielder Method’, 10:58-11:02.

²⁶ ‘The Fielder Method’, 13:20.



Figure 2. Nathan-as-Thomas and the appearance release, 'The Fielder Method', 13:32.

He feels apprehensive because he does not understand the legal terms of the contract, but he still signs it. He is worried about seeming rude and admits he “wanted to impress Nathan”.²⁷ Here, normative rather than authoritarian methods are used to control Thomas’ workplace behaviour. The scene brings up the question of the agency of the affective labourer. Nathan-as-Thomas’ interaction with *The Rehearsal*’s legal team illustrates that it is not always the affective labourer’s explicit choice how far they want to commit to their work. As their boss or teacher, Nathan is in a position of power and can demand a deeper level of emotional investment to the work than the actors would perhaps like to give. The mechanisations of power were not visible to Nathan before he took on Thomas’ position, just as forms of normative control operating in the modern workplace are often imperceptible.²⁸ In his analysis of modern work cultures, sociologist Douglas Ezzy notes how modern employment structures often rely on the creation of a social community among their workers, to ensure compliance, e.g. referring to a company as a family.²⁹ Providing a corporate social sphere, which promises the workers a sense of self-fulfilment through their work is a way to “develop consensual normative forms of authority.”³⁰ This normative form of control is illustrated when Nathan-dressed-as-Thomas signs the release form despite trepidations because “everyone else is signing it.”³¹ When intimate relations become part of the production of capital, it is difficult to determine the labourer’s agency in how much of their affective expenditure is freely given. Nathan-as-Thomas chooses to hide his anxieties about signing the contract, because he feels pressured to do so by the work environment. Nathan’s experiences as Thomas make him question whether the love and joy presented in the other rehearsal with Angela are truly authentic representations of how the actors

²⁷ ‘The Fielder Method’, 12:58-13:26.

²⁸ Douglas Ezzy, ‘A Simulacrum of Workplace Community: Individualism and Engineered Culture’, *Sociology*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2001), pp. 633-34.

²⁹ Ezzy, ‘A Simulacrum of Workplace Community’, p. 632.

³⁰ Ezzy, ‘A Simulacrum of Workplace Community’, pp. 633-34.

³¹ ‘The Fielder Method’, 13:36.

feel because of the environment and the scenarios he has created, or if they are forcing themselves to display these emotions, maintaining a sense of distance from the scenarios he has created.

What strategies can be used to manage one's feelings at work and hopefully achieve the production of "authentic" emotions? Nathan feels that for a reaction to be authentic, it must be a spontaneous reaction. Nathan's Fielder method entails having the actors go to their primary's place of work, finding out intimate details about their life and even working in their job for a week. This approach to affective labour therefore requires the workers to adapt their subjectivity, to fulfil the requirements of their work and their boss. In her research into managing feelings at work, sociologist Arlie Hochschild proposed that there are two methods that can be used to perform emotional labour: surface and deep acting. Surface acting involves merely disguising what we feel and pretending to experience the desired emotions.³² When surface acting, the worker simply displays an outward gesture, which feels "put on".³³ This is what Nathan is hoping to go beyond when instructing his students in the Fielder method, which emphasises embodiment and taking on their positionality of their primaries, in order to react spontaneously. Of the two approaches she conceptualises, Hochschild upholds deep acting as yielding more desirable effects. Deep acting involves going further than pretending for others, and actually convincing yourself you are feeling the desired affects. She claims that this approach will always lead to a more convincing performance than merely displaying your emotions on the surface, just as Nathan does when training the actors.³⁴ Further, Hochschild posits that this more embodied strategy of bringing forth affects "also helps the worker" since it makes it easier and less strenuous to produce the desirable affects and perform affective labour.³⁵ The Fielder method presented by Nathan is similar to the process of deep acting, whereby the actors are asked to become more like the primaries they are meant to embody. The show emphasises how affective labour is "immersed in the corporeal".³⁶ What Hochschild outlines with her concept of deep acting is ultimately the production of subjectivity for work. Nathan's Fielder method implies that only through the adaptation of subjectivity are the actors on the show able to deliver an authentic performance.

Through Nathan's voice-over narration, the viewer becomes privy to his own experiences in acting like Thomas with the help of the Fielder method. We learn what adapting your subjectivity for work, according to the Fielder method, feels like. Despite his deep immersion into Thomas' personal life, he struggles to understand his student completely. As previously illustrated, Nathan does gain insight into Thomas' experiences by re-living the day from his perspective. However, Nathan feels that the illusion of becoming Thomas is shattered once he returns to his own house.³⁷ He decides that in order to become completely immersed in his role as Thomas, he must become "Thomas 24/7".³⁸ In order to achieve this complete submersion, Nathan tricks his student so he can move into his apartment, living and eating just as Thomas does. Despite all this, Nathan still feels estranged from his role as Thomas and

³² Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, p. 33.

³³ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, pp. 37-38.

³⁴ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, p. 35.

³⁵ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, p. 6.

³⁶ Hardt, 'Affective Labor', p. 96.

³⁷ 'The Fielder Method', 15:36.

³⁸ 'The Fielder Method', 17:36.

admits that “there were still parts of Thomas that were a mystery to me”.³⁹ While he has committed his entire life to the work of becoming Thomas and has tried his best to embody him, Nathan still experiences a sense of alienation which causes him anxiety. He believes there is a more secret part of Thomas, which he will not be able to reach no matter how hard he tries. Here, Nathan’s perception of the self and affective labour is in line with Hochschild’s conception of the negative consequences of the commodification of affect production. Hochschild argues that even when using the method of deep acting, the worker cannot produce the required emotions without experiencing some form of alienation, since the efforts of imagining keep the affects from becoming a part of oneself.⁴⁰ Hochschild upholds that there is an authentic self, which is negatively affected by the need to perform affects for work:

In the end, it seems, we make up an idea of our ‘real self;’ an inner jewel that remains our unique possession no matter whose billboard is on our back or whose smile is on our face. We push this ‘real self’ further inside, making it more inaccessible.⁴¹

Following Hochschild’s reasoning, all affects produced in the contexts of capital are inauthentic. Since both surface acting and deep acting involve some imaginative or corporeal exertion on the part of the worker and are not spontaneous activity, she posits that performing affective labour leads to self-estrangement. The fear of inauthenticity and the alienation Nathan experiences is something that he grapples with throughout the production of the rehearsals, particularly the one including Angela and their attempt at (re)producing family life. His fear illustrates the bind affective labourers find themselves in: Their emotions have become a commodity, becoming separate from themselves. This degree of separation is experienced as self-estrangement. The episode establishes Nathan’s longing for the “real”.

The Dangers of Deep Acting

Nathan is constantly questioning his own performance, especially that of fatherhood in the rehearsal including Angela: “I’m acting like a dad, but I definitely don’t feel like one. And that’s a problem”.⁴² Nathan continues to feel alienated from his role and does not think that the rehearsal is realistic enough. A foil to Nathan’s alienation is presented in episode six, “Pretend Daddy”, through Remy. Remy is one of the many child actors hired to portray Nathan and Angela’s son, Adam. When it is time for Remy to leave the set, he does not want to leave and breaks down into tears. Nathan is upset by this development, from the voice-over we learn that Nathan has developed a sense of attachment to Remy, too: “Out of all of the kids in this project, I sort of got along with him [Remy] the most”.⁴³ Remy’s mother Amber reveals to Nathan that she is a single parent and she believes that Remy has come to view Nathan as a replacement father figure. We see Nathan and Amber attempting to comfort Remy, they are filmed through

³⁹ ‘The Fielder Method’, 18:29.

⁴⁰ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, p. 36.

⁴¹ Hochschild, *The Managed Heart*, p. 34.

⁴² ‘Gold Digger’, *The Rehearsal* (HBO, July 29, 2022), 9:07-9:12.

⁴³ ‘Pretend Daddy’, *The Rehearsal* (HBO, August 19, 2022), 03:44-03:52.

the curtains of the cramped dressing room. Remy says in a small voice “I don’t want to leave you”, Nathan bends down and tells Remy he will come see him outside of the show.⁴⁴



Figure 3. Remy throwing a tantrum, ‘Pretend Daddy’, 03:24

This tearful interaction makes it clear that Remy has misunderstood the boundaries of his intimate labour. But the emotional vulnerability with which Remy (unknowingly) performed his role made him act more authentically (or at least Nathan viewed his performance as the most authentic). Remy was not able to maintain a professional distance to his work. His performance was the most convincing, however, this comes at the cost of him becoming “emotionally drained”.⁴⁵ Performing intimate labour has made him vulnerable to the negative affects he experiences once his time as an actor on the show is over. In terms of “acting”, Remy does not seem to have maintained any type of cognitive distance from his role as Nathan’s son.

Nathan fulfils his promise to Remy and goes to visit him and Amber at their home. Despite reminders by both Nathan and Amber that Nathan is not his father, Remy is still deeply attached to Nathan and says he still loves him.⁴⁶ Nathan is shaken by Remy’s attachment and decides to use the remainder of his resources to figure out how he could have prevented this breaking of public and private boundaries to have occurred.⁴⁷ After reviewing the footage he shot with Remy as Adam, he attempts to recreate the moments of fatherhood he rehearsed with Remy with another child actor, this time displaying “a slightly colder demeanour”.⁴⁸ However, he soon comes to realise that this “forced detachment felt like it was defeating the purpose of rehearsing being a parent”.⁴⁹ His realisation illustrates that intimacy is a constitutive part of the affective labour he and the actors are doing in the rehearsals. Some level of intimacy is intrinsic to the productive process, as we have seen with Remy, this intimacy is deeply affecting. In their

⁴⁴ ‘Pretend Daddy’, *The Rehearsal*, 4:50.

⁴⁵ Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta, ‘Intimate Encounters: Affective Labor in Call Centers’, *Positions: Asia Critique*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2016), p. 34.

⁴⁶ ‘Pretend Daddy’, 12:26.

⁴⁷ ‘Pretend Daddy’, 14:42.

⁴⁸ ‘Pretend Daddy’, 15:18.

⁴⁹ ‘Pretend Daddy’, 15:40-15:42.

study on the intimate labour done by call-centre workers, sociologists Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta found that “forms of alienation and intimacy ... are complicated rather than in opposition to each other”.⁵⁰ Remy becoming deeply affected by Nathan’s performance disproves his previously held belief that he must achieve a point post-alienation to be perceived as authentic.

An Alienated Audience

In this final section, I turn my focus to the analysis of the mise-en-scene. I posit that the aesthetics of alienation used throughout the show underline the message that *The Rehearsal* cannot present the viewer with an authentic identity, outside of work, to return to. I begin my analysis by turning to the much-discussed final scene of *The Rehearsal*. In his attempt to see how he could have drawn clearer boundaries for Remy, Nathan decides to act out a rehearsal as Amber, Remy’s mother (see fig. 4).



Figure 4. Recreation of Remy’s tantrum, with Nathan playing Amber. ‘Pretend Daddy’, 27:24

Nathan attempts to recreate Amber and Remy’s home life before and during the time when Remy was working on the rehearsal. The final scene is a recreation of Remy’s emotional breakdown after Nathan’s visit to Remy’s and Amber’s home. We see the young actor playing Remy tearfully breaking down, while Nathan in the role of Amber attempts to calm him by holding a comforting speech about the need to accept that nobody is perfect and that expressing emotions is important (partially to his own benefit as well as making sense in the situation being acted out). Nathan grows more confident throughout the speech and concludes with an assurance: “And I’m always gonna be here for you, okay? ‘Cause I’m your dad”.⁵¹ The child actor is visibly confused by this break in character. Nathan chuckles to himself, seemingly experiencing a moment of epiphany. He insists further: “No. I am your dad”.⁵² The two hold

⁵⁰ Mankekar and Gupta, ‘Intimate Encounters’, p. 17.

⁵¹ ‘Pretend Daddy’, 30:19-30:22.

⁵² ‘Pretend Daddy’, 30:35-30:47.

each other's gaze, before Nathan and the child actor hug and agree "to go play".⁵³ This is the final scene of the show: Nathan's epiphany about fatherhood could be interpreted as a moment of breaking through his alienation and reaching authenticity. But the nature of the show does not allow the viewer to believe in an authentic self. Indeed, the formal aesthetics of *The Rehearsal* negate the idea that there is an authentic moment to be found on screen.



Figure 5. I'm your dad. 'Pretend Daddy', 30:53

The nature of the rehearsal of parenthood Nathan creates is the creation of a private life for entertainment purposes, in which the actors are under constant surveillance. This estrangement of normality is illustrated when Nathan visits Amber's and Remy's home. Nathan narrates the experience:

It was strange being in a real child's home after being in a fake one for so long. I wasn't used to this level of detail. Every object was perfectly placed, but nothing was by design. It was a work of art, and it was just real life (see fig. 5).⁵⁴

Meanwhile, the camera shows close-up details of clutter in Remy's room and the house. The juxtaposition between this "real" domestic scene and the "fake" one the show has presented thus far is a technique to alienate the viewer. The "alienation effect" described by Bertolt Brecht, is a dramaturgical distancing effect, which in *The Rehearsal* is achieved by techniques like Nathan's voice-over, actors breaking character, or the shots of sound stages.⁵⁵ Nathan's voice-over makes the ordinary children's bedroom alien, something the viewer must examine critically to determine where the boundaries between what is produced and what is authentic lie in this comedic documentary. Through its use of the alienation effect throughout the show,

⁵³ 'Pretend Daddy', 31:08.

⁵⁴ 'Pretend Daddy', 08:11-08:28.

⁵⁵ Ansgar Nünning and Sammlung Metzler, 'Grundbegriffe von A-Z', in *Grundbegriffe der Literaturtheorie*, ed. Ansgar Nünning, Sammlung Metzler (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2004), pp. 285-86.

The Rehearsal makes explicit that it cannot present us with a point of exteriority to work. All that is shown is mediated at some level, if only later on in the editing room for the sake of creating a coherent narrative. In this way, the show parallels the modern working conditions sociologist Kathi Weeks critiques. Weeks criticises Hochschild's conceptualisation of emotional labour as being motivated by an idea of being able to return to an authentic self, outside of work. Weeks finds that as "work and life cannot be confined to particular sites" and are "thoroughly interpenetrated", subjectivities are fundamentally affected by the work they do.⁵⁶ Instead of finding ways in which to prevent the commodification of affects, Weeks therefore argues that all critiques of affective labour should be motivated not by the search for a subjectivity that is outside work, but rather "the struggle for a different quality of experience".⁵⁷ Nathan has accepted this lack of authentic feeling when he asks Liam to come play. Despite Nathan being dressed as Amber and the child actor knowing that Nathan is not his father, they are able to both accept the imperfect conditions laid before them and decide to suspend disbelief "to go play". I therefore interpret the final scene of *The Rehearsal* as an acceptance of this intimate moment being less than realistic, which allows for an improvement in the quality of experience.

While Nathan may have overcome the alienation he feels regarding his performance of fatherhood, the techniques used to alienate the audience uphold the general affective atmosphere of alienation. Throughout the show, the alienation effect is used to keep the viewer critical of Nathan and the premise of the show. This feeling of alienation the show produces in its audience continues on after the show is finished. Articles about the finale and its meaning were published in pop-cultural outlets, asking the question "Just what was HBO "docu-series" trying to do, and what lines did it cross in order to do it?" In the subreddit discussing the show, viewer's responses range from insisting that Remy and his mother are actors, while others are deeply concerned for Remy's emotional well-being.⁵⁸ Despite the show ending with an inspirational speech in which the protagonist realises the errors of his ways, viewers did not reach a point of catharsis as Nathan is presented to have done. Again, *The Rehearsal* blurs the boundaries of the public and private and makes the audience's private lives a site of alienation too.

Conclusion

The Rehearsal shows the material conditions of work, making visible the effort that goes into producing affects in others. The show demonstrates how working subjects are produced in the workplace, both through interpellation and normative forms of control. Nathan creates a working environment in which authenticity is deeply valued and commodified, leading to feelings of alienation and self-estrangement in himself. Even after using the more embodied strategy of "deep acting" in the hope of producing the desired affects, Nathan cannot immerse himself in the rehearsal because he feels alienated. This is contrasted by Remy's deep

⁵⁶ Kathi Weeks, 'Life within and against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics', *Ephemera*, vol. 7 (2007), p. 246.

⁵⁷ Weeks, 'Life within and against Work', p. 247.

⁵⁸ Various-Grapefruit12, 'He Also Seemed Young...', *Reddit*, 20 August (2022). At: www.reddit.com/r/TheRehearsal/comments/wt76l9/is_remy_really_6_feeling_even_more_manipulated/il4er2d/themanwithafriend, 'I Really Hope That K...', *Reddit*, 25 October, 2022. At: www.reddit.com/r/TheRehearsal/comments/yc3wmf/i_understand_and_now_agree_with_the_statement/itnu2hz/. Accessed 28/08/2023.

attachment to the social relations produced on set. The show illustrates that feelings of alienation do not curtail the production of intimate affective relations. This pervasiveness of alienation is underlined by the formal use of techniques to create an “alienation affect” in the audience. Nevertheless, Nathan is able to have a positive experience of fatherhood by the end of the show. Therefore, the affective stance to prevent emotional exhaustion is one which accepts the alienation implicit in producing intimate affective regimes. The search for “authentic” affects in the market sphere can lead to anxiety among workers, but as subjectivities become increasingly entangled with the spheres of work, this effort is pointless. *The Rehearsal* creates an imaginary of intimate labour, which is produced in spite of or in unison with feelings of alienation.