CHAPTER 3

Could Life Be… Producing Subjectivity in Participation

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The Video Could Life Be…as Prototype

In May 2013, a video was posted on the website of the Copenhagen facility for young drug users, U-turn, under the heading ‘Narratives by Youths’.1 It is titled ‘Could life be…’ If we click on it, we first read a sort of poem:

I grew up in chaos and confusion
Stuck in a destructive relationship
On a travel I met a young Turkish man – with bleached hair.
He sang for me on the beach, under the stars
Old Turkish folk songs
About moving on2

Then we witness a young woman – the motion pauses as her name Berrin appears in print – walking towards, climbing, and finally jumping from, a diving tower in an indoor swimming-pool, all the while singing in Turkish, accompanied on the saz by a Turkish-looking man sitting on the pool edge in swim shorts. Danish subtitles appear as she sings:

I'm on a long narrow road
I walk all day, I walk all night
I don't know what state I'm in
I walk all day, I walk all night

Berrin does not look like a professional singer or model, and the room is visibly ordinary. Yet the overall impression strikes one as aesthetic: beautiful images with interesting cuts and camera angles, including a vertical shot from the

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1 By October 2013, the URL was http://www.uturn.dk/fortael_unge_kunnelivet.html, but at the time you read this, the homepage may have been rearranged, so that the video may be found somewhere else on U-turn’s or Copenhagen City’s website, or may be gone.
2 All Danish text is translated into English by MN.
bottom of the pool through the shiny surface to the artfully patterned ceiling, suddenly broken by Berrin’s plunge.

At the website, we can read that the script was written by a ‘Youth from the evening group’, and that Lotte Svendsen, a famous Danish film director, participated, along with Kristian Kofod, psychologist at the facility, whom we can also see in a set snapshot, holding a camera on the diving tower, facing Berrin.

What’s the point? In a recent article in Stof, the Danish journal for drug treatment professionals, Kofod and one of his colleagues explain:

When the young people, through creative work, make new narratives, this leads to reflection and experiments with acting differently. ... Many of the young people we meet carry identity documents from schools, welfare offices or clinics. ... These documents tell strong stories about failed persons and negative identity, when they are based on deficits or psychological symptoms. ... But many of the young people we meet also bring along a wish to make creative narratives through creative activity. ... By working from these interests we try to help the kids create identity narratives that match their preferred self-image. This way, we try to give them a stronger position from which to act on their use of drugs and the relations that this use is part of.

Nielsen & Kofod, 2013, pp. 33–34

This video, and the reasons for making and showing it, is one of the things we currently (2013) analyze as instances of ‘User-Driven Standards in Social Work’ as part of our research on ‘SUBSTANce – Subjects and Standards’. At a time when drug counseling is increasingly standardized – not least, through representing clients by using validated standard tests such as the ‘Addiction Severity Index’/the ‘Euro-AdAd’ (Carpelan & Hermodsson, 2004) or the ‘Outcome Rating Scale’ (Miller et al., 2003) – aesthetic objects of this kind, and the practices of producing and using them, are visibly unorthodox as images of drug treatment and its clients. They seem to be completely idiographic and subjective. And where are the drugs? Yet they do suggest standards of some weight for social work with young drug users: Even though it goes against the dominant trends, the Ministry of Social Affairs have declared the ‘U-turn’ approach a model to be implemented in other Danish towns, and we are following and analyzing this process in collaboration with the social workers. Among other things, we have noticed that the video may well be unorthodox and ‘idiosyncratic’, but it is also not only state-sanctioned but reproduced on