

Popular Forms and the New Sensibility: The Mingling of High and Low Culture in Postmodern Performance

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Writing in 1965, Susan Sontag identified what she considered to be the ‘new sensibility’ of modern culture. Rooted in the experiences of contemporary life brought on by new technologies, modern culture seemed to be characterized by the accelerated production of commodities, and the speed of everything from travel to image production (p. 302). One of the key side effects of this phenomenon, Sontag pointed out, was the ‘abandonment of the Matthew Arnold idea of culture’, and the weakening of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural categories (ibid.). The explosion in available commodities and the subsequent relaxing of the ‘high’ and ‘low’ artistic binaries that Sontag had picked up on was a direct consequence of what Ernest Mandel would later theorise as a symptom of post-industrial, or late, capitalism.¹ While manufacturing technologies had made the mass production and distribution of agriculture or textiles possible in earlier stages of capitalism, modern developments had made it possible to mass-produce practically anything, from art to ideas. Given capitalism’s prevalence in practically all aspects of modern human life, it was, and still is, considered impossible to completely disentangle oneself from this economic system. This has made finding aesthetic strategies to critique the social and political inequalities it maintains difficult. From the 1970s onwards, this shift in aesthetic and political perspective would be felt more acutely; and the acknowledgement of this shift – this ‘new’ sensibility’ –

¹ Mandel’s periodization of capitalism described here is taken from Chapter 2 of his book *The Structure of the Capitalist World Market*, pp. 44–74.

would come to form part of what is understood to be postmodern. Postmodernism, as Jameson famously theorised, is the fundamental logic of this, the late capitalist period.

With high and low culture now participating in the same global marketplace, there has been greater exchanges and crossovers between them. One can see this particularly with Pop Art. Artists associated with the Pop Art movement, such as Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, incorporated aspects of popular culture, including cartoons, advertisements and commercial products, into their work. Though Pop Art was destined for the art gallery, technically making it high art, affordable pop art prints were widely available and found their way into people's homes and offices, making it popular culture as well. On the reverse, there have been many instances of high art being taken up by popular culture under postmodernity. Take, for instance, the example of composer Carl Orff's 'O Fortuna' from *Carmina Burana*, which has been popularized through its use on reality television shows like *The X Factor*. This does not change the status of Orff's masterpiece from high art to low, rather, as with pop art, the current cultural environment allows it to slip between those categories as its users need.

It was inevitable, given the significant presence of mass and popular culture in almost every aspect of human life in the second half of the twentieth century, that they would become crucial resources for performance-making – and they continue to be so at the present time. In this paper, I will consider the uses and influences of popular forms in two examples of postmodern performance: the Australian feminist arts collective Brown Council and the British theatre company Forced Entertainment. My argument considers connections to the popular beyond representation, and takes into account risk to the human body, issues of appropriation and human agency, and the ways these practices often elect to distort the popular forms they draw upon as a mode of capitalist critique. As well as demonstrating the fundamental role the popular now plays

in such practices, the paper aims to highlight some of the wider possibilities – social, political and aesthetic – of postmodernism’s embracing of popular culture.

Unmaking Popular Forms: Appropriating and Re-presenting

Under the conditions of modern capitalist production, representation and what it means to reproduce more generally are called into question (c.f. Baudrillard). This is due not only to questions of reproducibility, but also because of concerns about the ways in which these have historically served to reinforce power, privilege certain forms of knowledge and fix aesthetic forms which close off interpretation and meaning-making. One of the regular ways this challenge is posed in postmodern performance is through appropriation and re-presentation, which allows the limitations of the appropriated form, and aesthetic representation more generally, to be exposed and critiqued. As literary theorist Linda Hutcheon has observed:

while exploiting the power of familiar images, [appropriation and re-presentation] also de-naturalises them, makes visible the concealed mechanisms which work to make them seem transparent, and brings to the fore their politics, that is to say, the interests in which they operate and the power they wield. (1989, p. 44)

Forms of popular entertainment have widely been appropriated for the purpose of postmodern deconstruction and critique. There are a number of reasons why the popular has lent itself so productively to this task. Prizing virtuosity and accomplishment, the success of an act of popular entertainment depends on the masterful completion of a special skill, from acting a convincing character to juggling, in a way that seems to mirror the gloss and high sheen of cultural products produced for mass consumption. To this extent, many forms of modern popular entertainment may be regarded as embodiments of the capitalist logic. There is also the problem of the kinds of

representations that popular forms themselves have mastered in order to appeal to mass audiences. Surveying the history of popular entertainment, one finds an extensive array of ethically dubious representations of minority groups (e.g. blackface minstrelsy) and social types (the vixen or shrew) designed in accordance with the views and prejudices of ‘the masses’, which in the West have historically been white and patriarchal. Mass views are incorporated to ensure broad appeal and secure the financial success of the act (at the expense of reinforced prejudices and compromised social progress). Beyond this, certain generic popular icons, such as the clown, magician or marionette, set up specific expectations for an audience that entertainment will be forthcoming – thus demonstrating how culturally fixed certain kinds of representations become. All of these features also point to the implicit contract involved in spectatorship, one which is not exclusive to popular entertainment but certainly underscores it: that people go to the theatre, pay their money, and, in exchange, they are entertained. The popular, therefore, is rife with features that make it attractive for postmodern critique, and it has been extensively appropriated and re-presented in ways that deliberately reconfigure these traditional impulses. In some cases, the forms are emptied of their contents and deconstructed in order to expose their mechanics, as well as the expectations and ideologies, implicitly or explicitly, promoted through them.

Many of these issues are apparent in the work of UK-based theatre company Forced Entertainment. Formed in 1984 by a group of graduates from the University of Exeter,² the company’s work, as their name suggests, is concerned with the conventions and cultural expectations of theatre, particularly those elements of artifice and pretence that are intended to

² Members of the company currently include Tim Etchells (artistic director), Robin Arthur, Cathy Naden, Richard Lowdon, Terry O’Connor and Claire Marshall.

work on spectators in certain ways. Central to this is a preoccupation with the labour of actors in the live performance situation, and what they are expected to do to fulfil the demands of the performer/spectator contract, that is: to be entertaining. The company has sought to expose this labour in many ways, but most often by deliberately performing ‘badly’ in a consciously metatheatrical way: a performer’s tears are produced by splashing their face with pints of water (*Bloody Mess*, 2004), or the dying man’s guts, spilled out in his lap, are nothing more than tinned pasta (*Showtime*, 1996). While the company have devised performances from a wide range of sources – questions, props, stories, specific locations, built settings – elements of the popular are frequently appropriated and re-presented in their work. Indeed, as the company’s artistic director Tim Etchells has acknowledged, half their main influences come from art and theatre and the other half from popular entertainment (in Trueman, 2008).

Performances including *Quizoola* (1996) and *First Night* (2001) offer examples of how aspects of popular entertainment feature in the company’s work. In *Quizoola*, two performers in clown make-up, but otherwise ordinary clothing, sit in wooden chairs encircled by a ring of carnival lights and take turns quizzing one other at random from a list of approximately 2000 questions. Above their heads, a sign announcing ‘Quizoola!’ glows in red neon letters. In this performance, which, in various incarnations has lasted between six and twenty-four hours, the popular is signalled most clearly through the clown-face, the neon sign and the carnival lights. But the performers consciously resist each of these signs and the expectations they set up. For instance, while appearing in clown-face, the performers are otherwise themselves, answering questions in a manner that anyone might do if they were pulled inside the circle before an audience: awkwardly, playfully, sometimes self-consciously. As the performance runs its course, and the performers wear down, their ability to ‘perform’, even as slightly enhanced versions of

themselves, becomes challenging. Barriers drop, cognitive filters relax and the answers become more delirious, more sincere and freer. While some of the exchanges between the performers are funny, there is not a conscious or rehearsed attempt at provoking laughter in the way that a clown does. The expectations established by the scenographic elements, such as the neon sign and the carnival lights, are equally unfulfilled. Their incorporation, like the clown-face, is ironically juxtaposed with the reality of the performance situation: two people asking each other questions over an extended period of time. This idea is taken further in *First Night* (2001), a grotesque variety show consisting of familiar acts – mindreading, magic, ventriloquism, etc. – but in a nightmarish form. Dressed respectively in cheap suits, short sequined dresses, high-heels and with faces excessively bronzed and stretched into big, toothy grins, the eight performers stare wide-eyed at the audience in a manner that is both desperate and confrontational. Instead of entertaining us, the performers bore, scare and confront the audience. The traditional acts are distinctly unvirtuous and consciously displeasing: the ventriloquist uses a real person instead of a dummy; dance routines appear awkward and under-rehearsed. During the ‘mind-reading act’, performer Cathy Naden points to individual members of the audience and announces how they are going to die. The effect is so unsettling that many audience members leave. In this case, the performance explodes the conventions of the popular iconography it utilizes, taking the aim to please to shocking and ridiculous extremes. In place of the polish and high-gloss of traditional showbiz, the audience faces something messier, scarier and more confrontational – in many ways the antithesis of what the popular theatre traditionally sets out to do.

Similar uses of the popular can be found in the work of Sydney-based performance collective Brown Council. Formed in 2007 by Francis Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith, the collective’s work is concerned with what it means to perform, both on stage

and socially, and the act of spectating. Endurance performance and body art practices of the 1960s and 70s, such as Yoko Ono's, Marina Abramovic's, and Barbara Cleveland's, have held particular appeal for the company and have provided a 'framework' within which they feel they can develop their work (Brown Council, 2014). The collective is also indebted to popular forms, including stand-up comedy, spectacle and pantomime, which they consciously appropriate and re-present in their practice. The mixing of 'low' and 'high' art forms in this way, the group acknowledge, allows them 'to parody the stereotype of the 'male artist genius' and to open up an alternative space for [their] own [feminist] practice to be considered' (ibid.). The group's use of predominantly comic modes of popular culture is also deliberate, allowing them to 'challenge the well-worn cliché that women, especially feminists, can't be funny and to antagonize the seriousness of "high" art forms including early performance art' (ibid.).

As with Forced Entertainment's work, Brown Council tends to ironically upend the popular conventions they draw upon. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in their performance *A Comedy* (2010–2012), a durational performance designed to explore not only what it means to laugh and provoke laughter, but also, and more fundamentally, the politics and ethics of spectatorship and aesthetic participation. The performance, which Brown Council have referred to as an 'endurance spectacular', centred around five classic comic forms or gags: stand-up comedy, performing magic tricks, the dancing monkey act, performing slapstick routines and taking a cream pie in the face (Brown Council, 2014). A large white box with 'COMEDY' spelled out in large capital letters suspended at the rear of the performance space told the audience what to expect, and tomatoes – those symbols of performative failure and audience dissatisfaction – marked out the playing area. With tall, handmade paper cones atop their heads, recalling the image of the classic 'dunce' or fool, the performers took turns executing each act as

chosen by the audience. The acts themselves are almost humorously under-whelming and usually humiliating: the ‘magic act’ consists of a performer making bananas ‘appear’ out of their trousers and ‘disappear’ by eating them; in the slapstick act, two performers slap one another repeatedly across the face for a period of time. In the ‘dancing monkey’ act, a performer dances for the audience to solicit donations of pocket change. As each of these simple but exposing acts is repeated and endured by each performer over the four-hour period, the darker aspects of the act and humour are uncovered. One can eat *too* many bananas and be slapped too many times. What begins as cheerful and good-natured becomes violent and cruel the more times the acts are repeated.

The durational and repetitive elements of the performance were designed to prompt the audience to reflect on their agency and their own role in tolerating, or actively participating in, what effectively constitutes forms of (albeit invited) abuse on the performers. If this were not clear enough, at the end of each hour the performers blindfolded themselves and stood in dimmed lights in the middle of the performance space. With an unspoken invitation given, many audience members chose to pelt the performers with the tomatoes that marked out the playing area. The questionable ethics of spectatorship and the uneven distribution of power in the room at that moment were fully revealed by spectators enacting (further) abuse on the performers through a simulated firing line. In such moments, *A Comedy* produces a ‘tension’ between the spectacle of entertainment – or the audience’s desire to be entertained – and the performers’ spectacle of failure and endurance. Curator Anneke Jaspers has observed that at this moment ‘the friction between viewing pleasure and discomfort, and between obedience and empowerment, took a more confronting turn. Even in refusing to act, viewers were complicit in [the performers’] degradation and in fulfilling the work’s critique’ (2011, p. 16).

In the cases of both Forced Entertainment and Brown Council there is a deliberate subversion of the conventions of popular entertainment forms and the expectations audiences hold about the way they are supposed to work. In contrast to the virtuosity and accomplishment required of the forms' 'successful' performance, their re-presentation in these contexts is decidedly un-virtuous. In her book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, Sara Jane Bailes refers to this as 'radical amateurism', a deliberate aesthetic strategy 'honed [by certain artists] in order to derail stage conventions, the ambitions of dramatic integrity, and the process of spectatorship' (2011, p. 56). This amateurism, or failure to meet an acknowledged standard, is not accidental, but a deliberate subversion of the conventions one associates with or ascribes to a form. Bailes theorizes this kind of failure through slapstick comedy and punk rock music. In slapstick, it is the failure to execute a typically mundane task that presents opportunities for humour. Punk provides a more anarchic and political entry into failure; as Bailes observes '[t]he approach and style of playing [Punk] are aggressively antithetical to established mainstream values of harmony, continuity, and social stability' (ibid., 51). In both of these examples, failure is not to be regarded as something accidental or as a mistake, but is very much a part of the DNA of these particular forms – therefore their 'successful' performance is reliant on their in-built failings. In a similar way, the re-presentation of the popular in ways that contradict their origins in these contexts is a strategy designed in part to critique traditions, representation and capitalist production. In resisting the aesthetic conventions of the commercial theatre and forcing us to watch familiar popular forms breakdown, the work challenges us to reflect on our expectations – and the source(s) of those expectations – and the frustration and disappointment in not having them met. By challenging our views of what 'success' is and how to come by it (that is, through failure), this work may increase our awareness of the failure of the larger systems that govern our

world and our lives. In this sense, as Bailes proposes, we may also regard failure as a hopeful strategy; if we can ‘valorize the potentiality of disappointment’, we might start to see the impression of another world take shape among the chaos (ibid., p. 56).

Although resistant to the late capitalist, cultural sensibility we expect, the desperation, awkwardness and failure built into some of these acts can appeal to us in other ways, perhaps because they are more relatable to our everyday experiences (and our own failures) than the circus clown or the bronze-faced showbiz entertainer. This was recognized by theatre critic Lyn Gardner who, in her review for *First Night* for *The Guardian*, noted ‘[h]ow fascinating these fragile, glittering, tottering creatures remain, even when we have seen behind the pancake and sequins, and how we recognize our own vulnerable, embarrassed humanity in them’ (2001). The same could be said of how we engage with the failures and abuses on display in *A Comedy*. Brown Council hope that the ‘tension’ produced by the performance’s duality as a (failed) spectacle of entertainment and as a spectacle of endurance will provoke ‘audiences to consider the politics of spectatorship and highlight the disparity in how [they] understand and exercise agency’ (Brown Council, 2014). In confronting the duality present within the work and the tensions (frustrations, ethical objections, disappointment) this produces, we might find a critical space to reflect on our actions (or our inactions). And perhaps, somewhere in the dense fog of this critical space, we may find what Bailes recognizes as hope: ‘a different image of a different world’ (2011, p. 62).

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