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The fiction of public life

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Abstract
One of Woody Allen's first jobs was as a gag/joke writer indirectly for New York gossip columnists. To coordinate with the appearance of famous people at grand openings, Allen would write appropriately witty lines that a star's press agent would work hard to get placed in a newspaper column like Walter Winchell's. The lines would be treated as authentic quotes as the star entered the premiere, club or ceremony (Lax 71). His reputation grew from this ability to see what would be humorous to say in a very public setting, or just generally what would make a particular star look more engaged, more intelligent or more alluring. The presence, at least according to the gossip columnist, was real; what the famous person said was a fiction.

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The Fiction of Public Life

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One of Woody Allen's first jobs was as a gag/joke writer indirectly for New York gossip columnists. To coordinate with the appearance of famous people at grand openings, Allen would write appropriately witty lines that a star's press agent would work hard to get placed in a newspaper column like Walter Winchell's. The lines would be treated as authentic quotes as the star entered the premiere, club or ceremony (Lax 71). His reputation grew from this ability to see what would be humorous to say in a very public setting, or just generally what would make a particular star look more engaged, more intelligent or more alluring. The presence, at least according to the gossip columnist, was real; what the famous person said was a fiction.

If we turn the crystal around somewhat you can see quite a different engagement with the fictional real life. Jackie Chan, possibly the best-known film star, plays a variety of roles from police detective (the Police Story series to his Hollywood Rush Hour) to some saviour of a particular school of kung fu (think of the Dragon Lord series). One of the features of action/kung fu are the fight scenes, elaborately staged stunts of flying bodies and various forms of body blows that have become the base aesthetic of videogames such as Tekken. They have been reformed as a slightly changed aesthetic and with a great deal more pyrotechnics by director John Woo and his series of gun operas, from A Better Tomorrow to the Hollywood-financed Face/Off. The stunts in these various films are appealing in their fetishistic stop in the narrative. For a moment everything is arrested for the movement of bodies. The outcome, although not assured in each battle, is more or less guaranteed in the ultimate survival/triumph of Jackie Chan as hero. Like watching Western professional wrestling the question is always asked: 'was that real?'

The melodramatic quality of the films combined with Chan's use of physical humour makes the audience debate the reality of the action sequences. Jackie Chan turns the question around as he resolutely performs all of his "stunts" in his own movies and he reinforces his real through the final trailer in his films as the credits roll, which shows the failed attempts at doing the various stunts where the blood flows and the ambulance occasionally arrives to take Chan away (Chan). Chan is more real in his fictional constructions because there is no blue screen or stunt double hanging from the bus or falling through glass ceilings. One of Chan's laments as he ages is that to ensure his career's longevity he must eventually adopt the "fake" "blue-screen" action style of the Stallones, Willises and Schwarzeneggers of the world.

A third angle to view the crystalline refractions of public life is to observe President Clinton in his various representations during his impeachment trial. There are three moving images presented. First, there is the presidential image -- he continues to make speeches (think of the bizarre State of the Union address at the end of January; he presents policy initiatives and meets with international leaders, and we see these moments on the evening news or in stills for the newspaper front pages). Second, there are the medium close-ups edited with close-ups of the president's face, Hilary Clinton's face and their hands: this is the familial Clinton. Third is the washed-out videotaped evidence that Clinton gave to the Grand Jury investigation about his affair with Monica Lewinsky that the trial managers from the House of Representatives are using in the Senate impeachment trial: here is the juridical Clinton which melds the public and the private (think of Monica Lewinsky's testimony: "I saw him more as a man than a President").

Making sense of public life is then not so much about getting to the real or the non-fiction, although that seems to be the will-to-narrative that drives our desire to watch and listen to gossip about the famous. The fictions produced are deployed realities, produced and proliferated for certain functions (Foucault). Woody Allen's unseen efforts are producing the more complete self, where the public arena becomes an elaborate Lacanian mirror stage for an audience. Max Factor's make-up techniques in Hollywood are a similar technology that transforms the self into an image. Jackie Chan's apparently real stunt work has been redeployed into the exigencies of publicity for a Hollywood film; as Redford's Sundance Festival's construction of independent film becomes part of Hollywood's industrial appropriation machine, Jackie Chan willingly becomes part of the revitalisation of Hollywood through the Hong Kong aesthetic. His "real" invigorates the decaying action genre with its extratextual narrative of personal risk.

Woody Allen's and Jackie Chan's fictions have been well integrated into the system of representation;
after all, as members of the entertainment industry their world is a fictional space that intersects with reality to connect to an audience.

Clinton represents something quite transitional and significant in his versions of the self. There are clear deployments of the self put in place by Kenneth Starr and the Congressional Republicans (sounds like a good name for a pop band) that not only place the fictional purity of the President against the backdrop of deceit and adulterated philandering. But there is also the remarkable play of the fictional deployed selves to the audience. This is not the end of the politician’s career as we witnessed with Gary Hart’s decline or a myriad of other American congressmen who have fallen into the fictions and moralities of a sex scandal. What we are witnessing is the sophisticated reading of the fictional public life by the cognoscenti who just happen to be the entire American populace. Grossberg once wrote in a lament that the right had monopolised what he called the affective economy in the United States. What he meant was that the right was able to mobilise sentiment and, in that way, shape the political and cultural agenda (Grossberg). The Clinton impeachment trial with its three clear versions of the self demonstrates that the overriding fiction of all the representations and the confusion between the real and the fictional production of the self -- something that has been a given in contemporary (we could call it modern) politics -- no longer works.

What an audience now looks for is slippage in the fictional plates that reveal something else. The risk is perpetual that the manufactured fiction will not hold and another fiction will supplant it. Refracted, reflected and rerefracted, the fiction of public life has been revealed by its own mechanisms of concealment. Its crystalline structure is solid zirconium which is really quite fine.

References


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