The Circulation of Commodities

Alexander Cockburn spins the Wheel of Fortune, and muses on game shows' appeal...

A game show is reality, not fiction. Except for sports and news, game shows are the only reality left on television.

— Giraud Chester, executive vice-president of Goodson-Todman Productions.

I visited “Wheel of Fortune” on the first day of spring. The radio told me that it had been another good day for the Dow and that the House of Representatives had just rejected President Reagan’s request for $100 million for the Contras. With uplifted heart, I swung into the NBC parking lot in Burbank and made my way towards Studio 4, outside of which was a long line of people waiting to get into “Wheel of Fortune”, the most popular show on American television, source of pleasure and excitement for forty-two million Americans each day.

Inside, they were starting to tape a show. The wheel spun and disembodied voices squealed, “Whee-e-e-e-l of Fortu-u-u-ne!” A nymph, vestal virgin in the Temple of Mammon, raised her arms in gesture of demonstrative worship towards a Mazda light truck and a revolving platform, partitioned into three rooms crammed with consumer durables. A curtain fell swiftly in front of her and her temple, and the camera shifted to “our host”. Pat Sajak, who smiled pleasantly and then introduced the nymph, emerging radiantly from behind the curtain, as “our co-host”. Vanna White.

Then Sajak introduced the three contestants, each backed by a great sun painted red and yellow and blue. There was Phil Loper, a first year student from the University of New Mexico; Heather Daly, a psychology student at UCLA; and Mark Steimer, an administrative assistant in a communications company — as nice a bunch of young people as you could hope to meet.

The atmosphere was of a mutuality of good feeling so pervasive that even in its forced moments it had an innocent authenticity much like Vanna’s smile and eager cries as she urged on the players. The studio crowd was encouraged to applaud, but they seemed to want to applaud anyway. Only the players themselves appeared a bit self-conscious as they shouted, “Thousand dollars!” at the wheel and clapped resolutely as it revolved. (It soon became apparent that Mark, the loosest of the three, was going to do the best. Early in the game, either Phil or Heather started well, building up their dollar holdings, calling out correct letters on the great puzzle board so zealously tended by Vanna. But then they stumbled, and there was Mark, ready to clean up. It was Phil or Heather who got as far as THE E—T—N P—R—DS, but somehow it was Mark who rose to fortune on their honest toil by guessing THE EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS.)

With each victory came an implacable ritual: Sajak announced to Mark the dollar value of his win — say $3,000 — and attention shifted to the heaped-up prizes, as Mark peered at an off-camera billboard listing the available goodies and their dollar values.

“I’d like the Caribbean cruise.”

“Now we’re talking,” said Sajak gleefully.

And for $1,999, the pine bookcase.”

“Fine with men, and that takes you down to $495.”

“Uh, for $400, I would like the mantel clock.”

“And that leaves you $95 in gift certificates. And now, let Jack tell you what you’ve got.”

And then came, with anonymity from the heavens, the deep voice of Jack.

“They’re beautiful, Pat. Mark, we start with Hamilton’s Monticello mantel clock, key wound, eight day, walnut solids and veneers, gentle triple chimers, furnished by Hamilton, retail value $400. Now, this impressive arch-front bookcase is a reproduction of an early Spanish design. It’s carefully crafted in pine...
with panel doors at the bottom. And, finally, we'll fly you and your guests to Miami, to a new superliner, the fun ship Holiday, cruising seven days to Saint Martin, Saint Thomas, and Nassau, all furnished by Carnival Cruise Lines, retail value $2,900.

Jack's voice kept us company as the evening wore on.

"Wheel of Fortune" shows are taped for about twelve days each month, with sometimes as many as five half-hour shows recorded per day. Mark was a three-day winner, so he didn't look too upset when he lost a bonus-round chance to win the $7,000 Mazda light truck. He already had $15,120 worth of prizes in his possession, including two vacations. With a final radiant smile, Vanna bade him and his girlfriend, Danna, farewell as they stepped out into the night.

Ours is a society with a most refined sense of discrimination about what constitutes the legitimate proceeds of luck and application, and what pertains to the less wholesome pursuit of getting something for nothing. And it is no small part of the genius of Merv Griffin, inventor of "Wheel of Fortune," that he understood this sense of discrimination.

Griffin has said that the game developed from his memories of long car trips with his family when he was a little boy. He and his sister would play hangman, the game where you guess the letters of someone's name (and concurrently fill in the macabre outline of a hanging man). In the early seventies, Griffin blended an element of hangman with the old carnival wheel, thus fusing what the French essayist Roger Caillois once isolated as two of the four basic types of play: the agon, or contest, and alea, or chance. The agon category includes games of skill, such as chess, tennis, football. Alea includes roulette, cards, dice — games of fate.

Each "Wheel of Fortune" program opens with both the image and reality of chance as the great wheel is spun. The player finds, most often, that the wheel has bestowed somewhere between $150 and $1,000 in the opening round, and the chance to call a consonant. Decryption and gambling then march forward arm in arm, as the player presses his/her luck with the wheel — thus racking up dollars to make appropriate inroads into the pile of commodities — while filling out the puzzle board with intuition and common sense, occasionally buying a vowel (for $250) to help things along.

The selection of contestants is an unending process. Each month, Pat, Vanna, producer Nancy Jones, and staffers Harv Selsby and Peggy Lavell take off for a new city to find players. In a two-day stint in Atlanta at the start of April, they conducted four interviews a day of 150 people each, thus winnowing down 1,200 of Georgia's finest puzzle solvers to the tiny group that would finally be invited to travel, at its own expense, to Burbank. Once in lift-off mode at Burbank, waiting for the final call, the contestants are given a series of briefings by Harv and Peggy, by the "compliance and practice" people ever alert to the possibility of cheating, and by PIC-TV on the all-important topic of the prizes.

What does the staff look for in contestants? "Well," said Peggy, "we ask ourselves, do they have energy, personality, a sense of humour? Are they having fun? We don't want to have people who are introverted. Not that they aren't people, but on the game show it's that little extra spark the contestant brings that adds a lot to the game."

Just as Peggy and Harv were rounding off their account of the rites de passage of competitors, I could see three of them being shown this particular day's stock of prizes. No unauthorised contact with contestants, pre-show, is allowed, but I joined Karen Griffin, assistant to the producer, as she wandered around the prizes making sure everything was just so. Merv Griffin has said that "Wheel of Fortune" gives Middle America the excitement of a shopping trip along Rodeo Drive. Actually, the prizes are exactly what the average rational American would buy if God suddenly bestowed an extra fistful of dollars. Karen said that audiences use the show like a sales catalogue, calling up to ask where that bookcase or brass lamp came from.

The lights went up, the crowd filed in, the wheel began to spin. When all goes well, a "Wheel of Fortune" show builds, across the half hour, to a climax and dramatic resolution through the substantial victory of one contestant over Fortune's Wheel. That night it was the turn, and the triumph, of Dolores Rovnack, a young housewife from Redondo Beach.

At the end of the first half hour alone, she had won Le Creuset of America blue cookware, $350; Krups small kitchen appliances, $358; a Taylor Woodcraft Gourmet Servic Cart, $450; a service merchandise gift certificate, $142; a pair of tea caddy lamps, $280; a Hitachi compact disc player, $450; a Suzuki portable keyboard, $532; a Van Cleef & Arpels eighteen-carat gold and diamond scalloped-shaped ring, $1,300; and, finally, what Jack's oleaginous tones announced as a guarantee to "fly you and a guest from Los Angeles to New Orleans, where you may long remember your week's stay at the Bienville House in New Orleans' French Quarter. It's close to historic sights and sounds, furnished by the Bienville House, retail value $2,238."

In the next two games Dolores won another $15,460 worth of prizes, including a RCA video camera and recorder, $2,320; a Sony stereo cassette, $400; a Sharp video recorder, $600; and airline tickets and a three-day stay at the Hotel Coronado in San Diego, $960.

Finally, the bonus round. Sajak asked Dolores to give him five consonants and a vowel, and Dolores offered L,N,R,S,T,E. Up on the puzzle board went E--- R-RE, with indications that the puzzle was a phrase of two words. Dolores had fifteen seconds, and after about eight she cried out "MEDIUM RARE," thus winning a Mazda hatchback with a/c, radio cassette, floor mats, freight, tax and licence, $9,079.

I saw Dolores right after the show as she was busily signing forms put in front of her by someone from PIC-TV. On one of them I noticed
excited. "What do you do, Mark?"

"I came back, made an appointment to come for an interview in July of ’85. I passed the test. I played the game and they liked me. I didn’t think they’d call me but they did, out of the blue, just when I was getting ready to call them back and make another appointment."

"How’d you guess MEDIUM RARE?"

"I like to eat. When I saw R. blank. R.E. I knew. Have I got room for all this stuff? Well, I’ll give some to my mother. I’ve got several sisters-in-law. I’m sure they could use some of the stuff. Thirty thousand dollars in prizes. Boy, that’s twice what I was making when I worked as an accounting assistant at Hughes Aircraft."

It was the end of taping for the day. Vanna passed by, sighing. "I’m exhausted. When I go home after doing five shows I usually die." She bathed me in a wonderful smile and moved on. Security guards paced watchfully round Dolores’ prizes. The puzzle board went dark and the wheel came to rest.

"Wheel of Fortune" isn’t about greed. It’s a stately mime of capitalist circulation of commodities, It is a Keynesian parable about the creation and satisfaction of demand — proper motions of the economy — does not pit competitors against each other: it’s all against the wheel and the limitations of their own skills. Even the losers don’t seem too upset. Many of them have won something nice, and even the complete losers go home with a bottle of carpet cleaner (or some similar reminder that consumerism has its dreary side). For all the talk of prizes, Sajak was right when he said, “Ours is not a big money show, relatively speaking. We’ve had a few instances where people have lost a huge amount of money, but usually it’s a few hundred dollars. You get bankrupted, you lose a microwave oven. It’s not a matter of life and death. The show is not vulgar. As Vanna has said, “It’s not hysterical like ‘The Price is Right’. Who wants to look at screaming women at 7.30?”

Dolores was understandably excited. “What do you do, Dolores?” “I’m a homemaker.” “What does your husband do?” “He’s an electrical engineer for a major aerospace company, here in L.A.”

"How come you’re so good at ‘Wheel of Fortune’?"

“I watch it in the morning. I watch it in the evening. For over ten years. I practise a lot, ever since I was in junior high school and high school. It’s my favourite game show. I tried (to become a contestant) a little over a year ago and I didn’t pass the written test. So I was discouraged. I came back, made an appointment to come for an interview..."

Dolores referred to her treasures that the retail value of the prizes listed above are manufacturer’s suggested Retail Price and are not necessarily the fair market value which must be reported to the US Internal Revenue Service for Federal Income Tax Purposes... You may forfeit any prize won for income-tax purposes. Notification of such forfeiture, however, must reach us three days after tape date.

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This objectivity was sustained when it came to the prizes, as though Dolores recognised that it was absurd to have both an RCA and a Sharp video recorder, yet simultaneously accept the entirely correct proposition that, as presently constituted, American capitalism (and Japanese capitalism, too, for the show’s ideology is internationalist and anti-protectionist) can survive only if the consumer buys as many video recorders, microwave ovens, et al. as the home will hold. There’s no hoarding on “Wheel of Fortune”, no obeisance to the exigencies of capital formation, the need for thrift, and other virtues dear to the heart of the Chamber of Commerce.

The game, because it is an idealised representation of the proper motions of the economy — does not pit competitors against each other: it’s all against the wheel and the limitations of their own skills. Even the losers don’t seem too upset. Many of them have won something nice, and even the complete losers go home with a bottle of carpet cleaner (or some similar reminder that consumerism has its dreary side). For all the talk of prizes, Sajak was right when he said, “Ours is not a big money show, relatively speaking. We’ve had a few instances where people have lost a huge amount of money, but usually it’s a few hundred dollars. You get bankrupted, you lose a microwave oven. It’s not a matter of life and death. The show is not vulgar. As Vanna has said, “It’s not hysterical like ‘The Price is Right’...”

Alexander Cockburn’s Corruptions of Empire (Verso Books) was released in Australia in March. This edited extract is reproduced with permission. © Alexander Cockburn 1987.
Convict Chic

Old prisons are all the rage in 1988. Tony Bennett explains why.

When Millbank Penitentiary opened in 1817, a room festooned with chains, whips and instruments of torture was set aside as a museum. Thus did a new philosophy of punishment committed to the rehabilitation of the offender behind closed doors distance itself from an earlier regime of punishment which had aimed to make power manifest by enacting scenes of punishment in public.

The same period witnessed a new addition to London's array of exhibitionary institutions. In 1835, after decades of showing her waxworks the length and breadth of the country, Madame Tussaud set up permanent shop in London. Her new establishment included, as a major attraction, the Chamber of Horrors where, among other things, the barbarous excesses of past practices of punishment were displayed in gory detail. As the century developed, the dungeons of old castle were opened to public inspection, as they still are, and in many places, as the centrepieces of museums — as at Lancaster Castle, for example, or at York's Castle Museum, located in two eighteenth-century prisons.

And Madame Tussaud's now has a rival in the London Dungeon, one of the city's most popular tourist attractions, where special-effects technologies reproduce the mutilation of the body in scenes of torture and punishment — branding, drawing and quartering, burning at the stake; crucifixion — from yesteryear. As for the Chamber of Horrors, it's still there.

The realism is stark and chilling in the Chamber of Horrors, with its sinister parade of murderers and assassins. Among the grisly relics here is the actual knife blade of the guillotine which was traced in 1846 by Madame Tussaud's son to the grandson of the Paris executioner. There is also a "lifesize" working model of the guillotine, complete with simulated blood stains. (John Lucas, The Magic of London's Museums.)

And much, much more: the scaffold from Hertford Gaol, the door of the condemned cell at Newgate prison, and the bell that tolled when prisoners were taken to be executed.

If all this makes for good reading, the connections between the histories of prisons and museums are not merely of anecdotal interest. Although little remarked upon, there is an important symbolic relationship between the development of imprisonment as the major modern form of punishment and the simultaneous tendency for museums and related institutions to devote all this effort to the display of past forms of punishment.

For it is the logic of the penitentiary that punishment should remain hidden from public view. To the degree that this is so, the penitentiary's claim to embody humane forms of punishment oriented toward the rehabilitation of the offender is deprived of public validation. The exhibition of the excesses of past regimes of punishment thus provides visible support for the Whiggish view of prison history in which it is viewed as an instrument of humane and benevolent reform. The openness of past scenes and practices of punishment to public inspection helps to insure that the doors of the penitentiary remain well and truly shut in conjuring up visions of such barbarity that the prison, whatever its defects, cannot but seem benevolent in comparison.

This is of special relevance in Australia's Bicentenary year, given the unique importance accorded to depictions of past forms and scenes of punishment within our museums and heritage sites. Yet this, too, is a relatively new development. Twenty to thirty years ago, most penal institutions from the convict period were either disused or dedicated to other government functions. Since then, the number of such institutions — as well as late nineteenth century prisons — which have been converted into museums is truly remarkable. Port Arthur, Hyde Park Barracks, Old Melbourne Gaol and Old Dubbo Gaol are among the most obvious examples, but there are innumerable local prisons which have been converted to house local history displays, and several more are destined to make a similar
transition in the course of 1988 — the Narrabri Old Jail Heritage Centre, for example. And, in all of these, depictions of past regimes of punishment figure prominently.

Yet it is not simply the marked increase in interest in past regimes of punishment which makes these new museums significant. In fact, such representations of past punishments usually play in two registers simultaneously: as parts of the Whiggish view of progress in the history of punishment, and as images of the nation’s origins.

In the Whiggish view, the emphasis falls on depicting the harshness of the convict system or that of the penal institutions developed to deal with indigenous crime in the course of the nineteenth century. Although, in its day, it embodied the aspirations of nineteenth-century penal reformers to use imprisonment as a mode of reformation, Old Melbourne Gaol now functions as a testimony to the harshness of a penal regime that is depicted as past. In its display of the instruments of prison discipline (the cat, truncheons, a whipping post), the scaffold (reconstructed for the film *Ned Kelly*), the condemned cell, the white masks prisoners were obliged to wear outside their cells and the death masks of hanged felons, the gaol fulfills the same function in relation to Australia’s modern penal system as did the museum within the Millbank Penitentiary for the mid-nineteenth century.

The more distinctive theme, however, is that which depicts the convict population as one of the cornerstones of the nation. In this respect, the penal past forms a part of a broader transformation of attitudes toward the convict period — to the extent that the discovery of convict ancestry is now one of the most sought-after prizes of genealogical inquiry. A healthy egalitarian tendency, no doubt. What is more questionable is the accompanying tendency for the convicts to be cast in the role of enlisted immigrants or early pioneers in order to provide a point of contact with the subsequent histories of settlers, squatters, miners and so on. As an official catalogue glosses the lessons of Port Arthur:

Gradually a tourist traffic developed, until today, visitors from all corners of the globe come in their thousands to Port Arthur to catch a vision of bygone days and relive a history of which we should be very proud, for it is the story of the pioneers, bond and free, who laboured together to build the foundations of the Tasmania we know and enjoy today.

It is not necessary either to idealise Australia’s early convicts or to transform them into oppositional sub-cultural heroes to suggest that many of them probably did not see it that way. This annexation of past experiences is, indeed, an exercise in “punishing history”.

The same theme is evident at The Rocks where, combined with a nationalised version of the Whiggish view of penal progress, it serves the unlikely purpose of establishing a conflict-free moment of origin for the nation. Cadman’s Cottage and the First Impressions sculpture in The Rocks Square both suggest that the only forms of conflict to mar early Australian history were antagonistic relations, imported from the old world, between the colonial administration and the marines on the one hand, and the convicts on the other. Yet these antagonisms — alien intrusions of a past foreign regime of punishment — are retrospectively erased once Australian history proper gets under way, as the convicts and marines, when granted land, are portrayed as joining shoulders with the settlers in laying the foundations for a free, democratic and multicultural society.

While all this may seem fairly innocuous, this transformation of the “penal past” into a national image has the further consequence of pre-empting the uses to which that past can be put. The use of such national symbols is never an innocent choice; its consequences have to be assessed partly in terms of the alternatives it excludes. Thus, in giving the penal past the role of a foundational chapter in the history of the nation, that past is simultaneously detached from other histories to which it might be more intelligibly, and certainly more critically, related — in particular, the broader and subsequent history of Australian practices of punishment.

In their singular failure even to gesture in this direction, all of the institutions mentioned above serve a crucial role in institutionalising amnesia with regard to contemporary practices of punishment. In aligning “the penal past” to the present within the framework of a rhetoric of national development, and in representing that past as one whose excesses have been overcome, contemporary forms of punishment are bereft of any public history except that which, axiomatically, suggests their benevolence.

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