

Let Me Entertain You

I DON'T CARE HOW IT LOOKS, OR IF WE'RE WATCHED BY HOW MANY BILLION VIEWERS, SEE, I AM CONCERNED WITH HAVING THE IMPORTANT SPOT IN YOUR HEART AND A CHANNEL TO MINE I WANT THIS BEAM TO BE LONG AND STRONG AND TRUE. IS IT?

-Eileen Myles, Public Television

'ALL OF A SUDDEN, IT WAS POSSIBLE TO WATCH ANY SHOW ONLINE', SIMON DENNY RECALLS. 'AT THE TIME, I WAS STUDYING SCULPTURE, BUT I FOUND MYSELF THINKING ABOUT THIS A LOT. MY LAPTOP HAD BECOME THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO ME.'

The original television series starring Tia & Tamera Mowry, *Sister, Sister* (1994), was a situation comedy. Twin black teenagers, separated at birth and adopted by single black parents of (conveniently) opposite gender, reunited and living together again, years later. We see how their lives have changed in the interim, filtered through (nature v. nurture) reactions to all the trials of average American teenagers: bullies, pimples, boyfriends, prom. Debuting in 2011, *Tia & Tamera* is a reality version of the alterna-twins plot line, which no longer relies on character actors. Two former child stars trying to create meaningful lives for themselves after television (yet *via* television) as adults – so, separately – while maintaining a twin rivalry. One with a house in Los Angeles, a black husband who eats buffalo wings out of a box in the kitchen and doesn't care to appear much on camera. The other with auditions downtown but a white husband and a winery further north in Napa Valley. Both now with babies. If the variables have changed the implicit question remains comparative: which version is better?

I GUESS I HAVE NO SKILLS OR SOMETHING. BUT I REFUSE TO TAKE OUT MY NOSE RING TO WORK AT STARBUCKS, BECAUSE IT'S NEW YORK CITY FOR CHRIST'S SAKE! YOU KNOW, THAT IS SO FUCKED. -ALEX BAG, UNTITLED FALL '95

At Raven Row, in London, the Austrian artist Mathias Poledna wryly insists that he is an entertainer. Alex Sainsbury was having trouble describing the particular appeal of Poledna's short film, *A Village by the Sea* (2011), before a live audience. Perhaps a fine proposal for the twenty-first century artist, because what do any of us really want art to *do*? For administrators and cultural bureaucrats and institutional curators there are always certain objectives. *L'art pour l'art* is (perhaps always was) a joke. The dandy is found to be too mono-dimensional for our times; he is recast as a loser in a feature film by Judd Apatow. Meanwhile Melissa Myers and Sheryl Sandberg tell us how to multi-task the corporate world into our lives from their biopowerful positions in the social media industry; self-reproduction, childbirth, yahoo! I remember the actress in Poledna's piece (bright eyes, tightly curled hair) also appeared as Zelda Fitzgerald in Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* (2011). Her face seemed to me too baby-soft and moon-shaped to convey the uncomfortable character of this very real woman who knew how to live: destructively.

The first season of *America's Next Top Model* was re-broadcast on VH1 in the programming-lite summer season that followed its UPN debut (2004), this time packaged together as a marathon. I watched all nine episodes back-to-back while doing Physics problem sets. One likes to think these were the halcyon days of pre-performative reality television, with the only precedent the totally unreal GenX house(/horse)play on MTV's nineties franchise, *The Real World*. Unintentionally, it seems, ANTM cast characters so earnest and so diverse as to later be streamlined out of popular series such as *The Bachelorette* (2003–), *Real Housewives* (2006–), *Top Chef* (2006–), *Flavor of Love* (2006–08), *Project Runway* (2004–), etc., because of the unpredictability of the social chemistry. For example the long and narrow contestant from New Mexico who otherwise would be a medical student; with a pixie-cut transformed into a pale shadow of Winona Ryder. The scene I remember best is from "*The Girl Is Here To Win*": pages torn outrageously from the New Testament and thrown scornfully in her direction by a devout, plus-sized hopeful from Memphis. Biology and the bible don't mix! It was a soft-inquisition of the Christian-fundamentalist kind – a scene mostly absent from the 'real' and really divided America that primetime entertainment more typically glosses over, along with tender issues of race and class, atheism and religion, education. Powerful and irresolute, and never again replicated, because TV dramatics are better confined to the too-personal ('I'll Prove You Got Me Pregnant at 15!') and thus hardly ever enacted with such vehement ideological force. Smoke without fire is a now-familiar fog.

IN 2007 COCA-COLA PURCHASED GLACEAU, THE MAKER OF VITAMIN WATER, FOR \$4.1 BILLION. AS A MINORITY STAKEHOLDER, 50 CENT WILL NOT HAVE TO DIE TRYNA GET RICH. ENTERTAINMENT VALUE, MUCH LIKE SURPLUS VALUE, CAN ONLY BE REALIZED IF ONE ALSO OWNS THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION, DESPITE THE LYRICAL EMBELLISHMENT: MY FLOW, MY SHOW BROUGHT ME THE DOUGH. A SITUATION FAR REMOVED FROM POOR MC HAMMER AND THE RECORD LABEL EXECUTIVES WHO CASHED IN ON THE NEW JACK SWING.

The sister of my ex-boyfriend was a producer of *The Jersey Shore* (2009–12). Snooki, he said, calls her ‘Mama Sarah’. Because she is maternal and attentive; helping coordinate the desired action of the show’s ‘plot’, as sketched out by a team of writers the ‘characters’ themselves know nothing about. A friend, confidant and coach to telephone at all hours for free advice, feedback or an ego-boost; whose undisclosed motive is how to best benefit ratings. A cynical bond, perhaps, yet more attention than I received from my ex-boyfriend – more than one could expect from a human relationship.

THERE ARE CERTAIN AUTHORS WHO INSIST THAT FICTION COMES FROM REAL LIFE: DICKENS, D.H. LAWRENCE, HENRY MILLER, NAN GOLDIN, LARRY CLARKE, LENA DUNHAM. IS YOURS WORTH LIVING – ?

Today the formal showmanship of Johnny Carson and the end credits to *Looney Tunes* (‘That’s All, Folks!’) are equally obsolete. We are missing the long-handled cane which unequivocally sweeps the lousy entertainer off stage; out from under the spotlight. The news cycle spins 24-hours and there are anchors who deliver headlines in the nude; ESPN Classic so that we can relive Phil Jackson’s Chicago Bulls or study the team basketball strategies of the New York Knicks circa 1970. The individual viewer has more autonomy than ever and the networks devise means to succor and pacify him; carefully setting demographic traps, squaring for bouts of binge-consumption, in the hope of an advertising goldmine. For example, the Netflix series based on compiled user algorithms, *House of Cards* (2013–), which contains the idealized cocktail of politics, romance and Kevin Spacey. Are authors now too weak to hazard our disappointment? (Their own failure?) Steven Soderbergh has given up on Hollywood because, he says, no studio wants a new formula. We give up on progress and want a palliative; to suspend the plot from its inevitable conclusion and the culminating difficulties of a denouement – Elizabeth Wurtzel forever staving off a final act, old age.

I’D RATHER BE ALONE. – PHOENIX

Both the Greek Chorus (see *Mighty Aphrodite*, 1995) and Brecht take care to announce: ‘*You are in an entertainment.*’ So too the simulated roller-coaster ride along a film reel before the movie begins at the cinema; because it looks so fake in HD, the lump in your stomach never comes. We experience neither absorption nor shock; flow effortlessly into the folds of the familiar genre as into the cushioned seats and air-conditioned theater, and afterwards, unchanged, back onto the city sidewalks: it’s evening again. ‘I should start an exercise regimen,’ he says, holding your hand, ‘my heart-rate only goes up when we have sex’.

IN HAITI IT IS FORBIDDEN FOR UNITED NATIONS EMPLOYEES TO ATTEND CARNIVAL FESTIVITIES, OR DEFILE, HELD ANNUALLY IN PROVINCIAL TOWNS (JACMEL, AUX CAYES, CAP-HAÏTIEN), BECAUSE ENTERTAINMENTS AND LARGE GATHERINGS OF PEOPLE HAVE GREAT POTENTIAL TO BECOME DANGEROUS. DANCE, ALWAYS, IS A RADICALLY UNPREDICTABLE ACTIVITY: LAGE KO’W, METE MEN NAN LÈ, SOUKE, VOLE

On my most recent cross-country flight, American Airlines provided appropriate on-board entertainment: a documentary on the wholesale food supply chain, Costco. It is a homegrown story of a responsible founder/CEO from the flyover country of the Midwest, whose bottom-up hard work eventually led to success in peddling oversized bottles of Excedrin and other non-essential consumer items to suburban families from coast-to-coast; even now in markets as foreign as the United Kingdom and Japan. The tone is patriotically optimistic but I wonder, who needs so many soft pretzels, plush toys, patio chairs...

WE RECOMMEND CHANGING THE BATTERIES REGULARLY TO ENSURE UNINTERRUPTED USE OF YOUR REMOTE CONTROL. – CABLEVISION

Anais Nin describes the sad voyeurism of the analyst, whose task is to dissect, in most intimate detail, the lives of his patients. Dr. Allendy cautioned her away from a Bohemian lifestyle in pre-Fascist Europe, back into the stable (boring) company of aristocratic society; the preferred mode of paying for entertainments rather than smashing glasses in a Russian club in Paris with one’s own foot. Dr. Otto Rank, too, never lived (so Nin writes). *The passive observer never will.*

IF THE EXOTIC DANCER (COLETTE, JOSEPHINE BAKER, DITA VON TEESE) IS THE FEMALE ENTERTAINER PAR EXCELLENCE, WHAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT THE ARTISTIC CAREER OF ANDREA FRASER? HER BODY OF WORK BUILDS UP, PARADOXICALLY, LIKE AN ENDLESS STRIPTEASE; THERE IS ALWAYS ANOTHER SELF, ANOTHER TRUTH TO LAY BARE. ●