

Nothing Compares 2 U: Notes on Sincerity

In the classic lover's lament 'Heartbreak Hotel' (1956) songwriters Tommy Durden and Mae Boren Axton helped the world to picture the King of Rock 'n' Roll as a jilted, suicidal wretch. Elvis Presley, dumped and homeless, would be 'down at the end of lonely street at heartbreak hotel', presumably drunk, presumably holding a bible and a gun. The romantic realism of that image still works because we can all imagine the kind of desolate and crappy, southern motel rooms that would have existed in the 50s. But what would a room in Heartbreak Hotel be like today? Probably just as scummy, although with one crucial difference: free Wi-Fi. Our modern Elvis, linked to the internet via a smartphone, tablet, or laptop, could click away his blues on Chatroulette, OK Cupid, or maybe even Grindr. The crucial ingredient that would make his resulting telepresent webcam chats, jpeg exchanges, instant messages or extended Sexts feel real, is the belief that all parties involved were emotionally committed to whatever activity they were engaged in; the belief that they truly meant it, whatever *it* was. To put it another way, there is a thing that makes communication on the World Wide Web work, and that thing is called sincerity.

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“Fucking TV writers. I don't know if they don't get it, but there are those of us who become retardedly attached to people...characters...”

This is what happens in John Lawrence's 03:30 minute video *Fuxing TV Writers* (2013): a young American woman, maybe late teens, maybe early twenties, sits in front of her webcam and bawls. 'When you end the show you don't have to kill everybody, ok', she sniffs. There is an emotional authenticity demonstrated by the act of crying here, an uncomfortable realness that transcends the awkward scene and allows the viewer to empathise with and understand her pain. That's one option; the other is remoteness, to use irony as a filter enabling critical distance to be kept. From this vantage point – lets call it the vantage point of the information age – the crying fan becomes another sad, oversharing obsessive, broadcasting a drizzle of irrational,

infantile and unstable emotions at us through the web. She is to be laughed at, linked to, and ultimately compiled in a BuzzFeed list we'll scroll through at the office, in bed, or during aimless freelance hours. It is the easier option of the two, but what do we gain through detachment? If the internet requires sincerity for intercommunication on the web to seem real, have detachment and irony, as our default settings for viewing 'content', lead us into a world of counterfeit experience both off and online? Perhaps that's the way it used to be, but things are beginning to shift. The works in 'Nothing Compares 2 U' function as distant harbingers of that sea change.

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Lets continue with a short inventory of tears. In 1990 Irish singer songwriter Sinéad O'Connor cries during the video for her cover of the Prince song 'Nothing Compares 2 U'. The scene is iconic and evocative because O'Connor, austere, beautiful and intense, thinks of her dead mother and sheds real tears. Jump to 2013. In the video for 'Wrecking Ball' Miley Cyrus sheds counterfeit tears as an homage to Sinéad. There is no suggestion of sincerity, no pretension to realness or authenticity; it is simply the use of an emptied emotional signifier for effect. Tears signify pain, pain is a symptom of heartbreak, and heartbreak has, since at least Elvis's heyday, been a prized topic for the saccharine, surface territories of pop music. Miley didn't mean it, but in realizing she represents the supreme triumph of the simulacrum, we didn't expect her to mean it either. Because while sincerity remains the condition through which interpersonal communication is made real, irony dominates as the prism through which cultural production is consumed. So, what are we to make of Mark Dean's work *Nothing Compares 2 U (Bas Jan Ader Mirrors Joan of Arc)* (2013)? Do we detach to engage, keep ourselves at a distance? Or do we empathise with footage of the enigmatic Jan Ader and the actress Maria Falconetti, in the guise of Joan of Arc, weeping. There is something incontrovertibly powerful about crying, about the open display of emotion. It is, like violence, one of the purest forms of sincerity. Crying is also regarded as the truest expression of grief, the ultimate signifier of real catharsis at funerals. But in these days of viewing with detachment and distance, the requisite response can sometimes be hard to conjure. An unusual symptom of this condition is the emergence of professional mourners: people who are paid to cry at funerals. An English company called Rent A Mourner (www.rentamourner.com) advertises this

service with the following caps-heavy claim:

RENT A MOURNER CAN SUPPLY PROFESSIONAL, DISCREET PEOPLE TO ATTEND FUNERALS AND WAKES. IF YOU SIMPLY NEED TO INCREASE VISITOR NUMBERS OR INTRODUCE NEW FACES, THEN WE CAN HELP.

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In a German TV interview conducted some years before his death, American author David Foster Wallace remarked ‘somebody once said that irony was the song of a bird that had come to love its cage’. For many that cage is the diffuse spirit of neoliberal capitalism. It has, at least according to Phillip Mirowski’s thesis in the recent Verso-published book *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (2013), turned us into individualistic, self-centered people who apply the rules of consumption to the whole sphere of interpersonal relations. That said, there are spaces this logic hasn’t completely saturated: Hannah Perry’s *Kicking My Game* (2013) finds it around a pub table, while in *Screen Test* (2011) Jaakko Pallasvuo finds it through critical introspection.

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If group shows are capable of fielding propositions that make us regard socio-cultural states of affairs in new and sometimes critical ways – specifically when artworks on display cohere around related conceptual territories – what is being proposed in this exhibition? ‘Nothing Compares 2 U’ is not so much a question as it is an indication. It is an exhibition in which works by Dean, Lawrence, Perry, and Pallasvuo attempt to show how artists, and perhaps we too, can resist producing images and behaviours in the service of a reductive ideology. The once flashy, glass and steel building of irony is now a tired, run down tenement block; sincerity is the wrecking ball we should send to demolish it.

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