

On “People’s Theatre”

Culture as Cannibalism

Ratticus

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The stage is set, houselights go out, curtain opens and a poignant silence reigns as actors hit the stage. Always the audience looks at the skin; arms and legs, usually attractive faces. The audience licks its lips. Honest observation must concede that beyond the facade of cultural awareness the real reason mass audiences attend the theatre or cinema lurks the haunting spectacle of cannibalism.

Is it really a coincidence that the real start of the season for Broadway plays and film programs occurs in the autumn when the time for barbecues has ended? Or that the current spate of high-tech science fiction flicks (Star Wars, etc.) and the video mania coincides with the development of microwave ovens, blenders, and Weber grills?

This is not meant to be a pro-vegetarian critique. Grazing people, you will find, most likely attend the ballet or modern dance performances en masse with similar sentiments. The dancer leaps, she may well be reaching for nuts or fruit; or stoops, to come up with a root or yam.

The point is, as Freud noted, and Whitman witnessed, in the flesh, so to speak, Art is of the body. Art is the expression of childhood sensuality and is a substitute gratification for what we’ve lost (been forced to give up). In a mass consumer society the distance between the spectator and play is double when you consider that it is the performer who enjoys the fruit of this sublimation directly. Cannibalism is a phenomenon of desperate need, of consuming that fruit, which we cannot have, by eating those that do.

Cannibalism occurs at times of crisis, during the most precarious relation with nature. Severed from the fertile ground of being, in this hyper-rational desert, a rampant hunger exerts itself. The thirst for experience, the hunger for instinctual gratification in the concrete imbroglio is merely titillated by the indirect perversions of the imaginary products of commercial artists.

Hungry for what? Man, I tell you to strip naked and howl on your roof tonight at the moon and clouds. Or wander aimlessly through a landfill by candlelight with swimfins and lace—you’ll get more cultural insight than by squatting, a la commode, before some Fellini Technogram.

Art is play and belongs to the pleasure principle, and is beautiful, but mostly for the artist. What is imagination but the active movement of images? The passive consumption of images may be beautiful, but be they another’s images, it’s cannibalism. Culture is cannibalism, a clear sign of instinctual desperation.

The People’s Theatre Movement

In the late 1950s and early 1960s America started experiencing street eruptions associated with Civil Rights and Anti-war demonstrations. As by magnetism, theatre on the streets followed. Groups like the Mime Troupe in San Francisco, and the Living Theatre in New York, decided to take Art directly to the people to speed up the awakening of a new consciousness sweeping the land. They also would perform in parks, in living rooms and rented storefronts, disdaining the technical clap-trap that makes much of Art so expensive and disingenuous.

Since that time nearly every major city has experienced the phenomenon of performers stepping out of the boundaries of traditional theatre. For one thing, the break against society that the Vietnam war inspired in youth reached a nearly-hysterical peak; as did a new consciousness engendered by drugs, music, communal and socialist experiments, people walked away from mainstream American culture and it was a long walk. It was more than clear that television had no answers for a new identity that sought and still seeks itself, nor does the commercial stage, or a commercial anything. Musical forms expanded to the degree that some wags referred to this phenomenon as “Woodstock Nation,” but it became clear that music could only partially accommodate the demands of consciousness rising. The idea of a new theatre, while it never approached the numerical appeal of music, could find a willing audience.

Hence arose the Free Southern Theatre of New Orleans, Family Circus of Portland, Word of Mouth Woman’s Theatre of Boston, Bread and Puppet Theatre in Vermont, Second City in Chicago, etc. Probably a hundred or more theatre groups (that are documented) arose around the issues of racism, sexism, anti-capitalism and more.

Of course, what many artists in divergent fields have discovered, is that apart from various facets of diseased American culture to work against, and organize around, it is the very fabric and structure of the culture—it is repressive and anti-erotic nature itself—that demands a more protracted and comprehensive struggle to build a new culture from within.

The Play Is The Thing

Since the end of the Vietnam war, and after some partial successes by the civil rights and feminist movements, the hysteria has abated, many of the groups have disbanded, but new ones have arrived and older ones continue to work to alter the nature of the society. Political differences abound, however, and while there is large agreement that American culture, indeed, Western Civilization has decayed to the point of barbarism, if indeed it was ever anything but barbarism exalted and sanctified by inertia, there is little unity among its various opponents.

A magazine in Minnesota, *Theatrework*, has been put together by a part of this theatre movement in the last two years, which has been working to unify the movement, even while it gives reports of the groups and allows space for the performers and other cultural critics to expound their work and their views. Originally, *Theatrework* was exciting as reports flew in of experiments in all parts of the country and the world. The magazine’s sponsors, a performing group themselves called Cherry Creek Theatre, has welcomed wide participation and even organized a large festival for many groups called the Gathering, which occurred in a small Minnesota town last summer.

Establishes Artistic Bureaucracy

While I never attended the Gathering, I followed its progress closely and with pleasure as its exuberant energy flowed out of the pages of *Theatrework*. I also was inspired to write about “The Freezer Theatre” in *Theatrework*, which was a Detroit version of the Alternative Theatre experience. In the year that ensued since the Gathering, however, I sadly watched as the magazine, and presumably its collective producers have sunk into an ever more insipid and treacherous position.

David Olson, the apparent leader of the Cherry Creek Theatre and editor of the magazine, has apparently taken advantage of the power and exuberance generated by the various components and adventurous adherents of the free theatre movement, and with certain others is trying to forge a bureaucratic priesthood to preside over the movement. The seeds for this bureaucratic counterrevolution already existed in an organization called NAPNOC, the Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee, which meets in Omaha and maps out a programmatic strategy for organizing “radical” artists and which seeks to forge them into a political power capable of controlling and influencing the interest of artists permanently.

Hence, in the last report of NAPNOC’s meeting, as reported in *Theatrework*, revealing elements of this strategy came in to the open. NAPNOC wants to “Network” the various “progressive” theatres in the country to expedite

touring, publicity and cultural exchange. NAPNOC disdains the use of the word “artist” (not a bad idea) but supplants this with the concept of “cultural worker” (yecch). NAPNOC sees that the progressive theatre people are poorly funded and inefficient programmatically and wishes to install a 1930s WPA-type program where the government gives substantial and permanent funding to these “cultural workers,” thereby establishing a permanent artistic bureaucracy which will see to it that artists no longer have to “go begging” for money, and that they are recognized as legitimate workers performing legitimate work in society.

It should be obvious to anyone with even the briefest experience in the political battles of the last twenty years that NAPNOC wants to be that bureaucracy. Already, at the University of Omaha, where Doug Paterson is a professor and NAPNOC organizer, there is a graduate program for work in “People’s Theatre” where the “materials to work with are the citizens of Nebraska, South Dakota, and Iowa as a start.” I found this out from a large, and shamelessly self-serving ad on the second page of the last Theatrework that I read before I cut off all contact with them.

Doug Paterson, with his Dakota Theatre Caravan, has a working theory of theatre, by the way, that makes up in effrontery what it lacks in vision. The DTC would (and does) go to a town and proceed to “interrogate” waiters, farmers, garage mechanics, nursing home residents—anyone somehow considered “small-townish”—and collects a history of the people’s lives and their area. Then the theatre troupe would “tell the people’s story in their own words” by performing in front of them what is supposed to be “people’s theatre.”

Besides being patronizing and one-dimensional, this kind of theatre merely elevates alienation to the aesthetic level. Doug Paterson is building a workers cult in a glorious struggle to keep people doing exactly what they have been doing all of their lives, reproducing Capital. Such experiments in socialist realism are precisely the tool the Soviet Union posits as the only theatre allowable and fits nicely into NAPNOC’s project of lyrical inanity.

Simply put, NAPNOC is an organization for co-opting the free movement and expression of creative people, to put their creativity to the service of enhancing the careers of bureaucrats in the government and the university. It would, should NAPNOC succeed, be up to these skills whether or not a person’s creative activity is to be recognized as socially progressive, or creatively useful. If the work of commercial producers and galleries today is a form of cannibalism, the success of a group like NAPNOC would be the fostering of cannibalistic excrement.

My program for cultural work, however, is to quit working. It is bad enough that the free play of imagination, sometimes emerging in objects and performances as “art,” finds so little room to move and so few people to play. It is no consolation to find people so interested in perpetuating this situation, especially when they are people who should know better. People who make a living doing art are no more to be legitimized than should be people who “earn” a living doing cars, or doing dishes in restaurants.

The point is, as Freud said, that culture is neurosis—culture is our reward for giving up our childhood, and is a devil’s bargain foremost. We are hungry. We hunger to touch and to play. We hunger to sing and to dance and to paint. We hunger for beauty and in the most sad and private way, whether we want to or not. Beauty is not merely the feast, it’s the hunger as well.

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