

Period Rush: Affective Transfers in Recent Queer Art and Performance

Tavia Nyong'o
[Forthcoming in Theater History Studies 2008]

In Terry Zwigoff's 2001 film, Ghost World, the malcontent Enid Coleslaw is firmly ensconced in the post-adolescent malaise her best friend Rebecca wants to grow out of. The tension between the friends erupts when Rebecca suggests they "pretend" to be yuppies. Enid acts out by dying her hair green and sporting a leather jacket. This response provokes Rebecca's outrage, and a smirk from Enid's nemesis, John Ellis, who sneers: "Oh my God, didn't they tell you? Punk rock is over. If you really want to fuck up the system, go to business school. That's what I'm gonna do. Get a job at some big corporation, like fuck things up from the inside." Enid's response to John Ellis is memorable for what it captures of the emotional alchemy through which queer and minoritized subjects negotiate subcultural histories: "God! Fuck you ... You know, its not like I'm some modern punk, dickhead. It's obviously like a 1977 original punk rock look. But I guess Johnny Fuckface is too stupid to realize it!"¹

In distinguishing her respectful approach to punk from mere trendiness, Enid bids for insider status despite her age, gender and suburban location. Scoffing at such a claim to authenticity would miss its spirit. In marking off her homage from derivative 1980s hardcore, Enid displays the ideological hairsplitting that is the genius and insolence of youth. Yet such stringent logic permits her to avoid the cynicism that her peers display towards subcultural histories. Enid and John Ellis float in the same cultural affluvia of suburban America, where the past is blandly recycled as kitsch. But Enid's sensibility

stands out amidst such simulacra. She longs to maintain contact with a ghost world unlike her own, a world that it is she, not John Ellis, who truly understands is dead.

What I will call the “affective transfer” Enid performs between past and present illuminates recent debates regarding the archive in performance. Where some scholars emphasize the autonomous transmission of embodied histories through performance,² I argue that Enid’s subversive genealogy reflects less the difference between archive and repertoire, than the difference within both. Her critique hinges upon the difference between reenactments that recycle the past as kitsch and those that renew the impact of historical emotion. Such affective transfers still occur in our post-historical times, fiercely attached to untimely feelings. They are postmodern, along the lines outlined by Lev Manovich, Fredric Jameson and Sue-Ellen Case, but they do not succumb to the “end of history.”³

Rather than simply end, history has transformed under conditions guided by new media and “the virtual.” Case speaks of our living in the era of “The Great Upload.” She argues “previous practices of gender, sexuality, materiality, community, and corporeality have been uploaded into various new technological zones.”⁴ Manovich calls this the “spatialization” of historical time, which has “replaced sequential storage with random-access storage; hierarchical organization of information with flattened hypertext” and the “psychological movement of narrative in novels and cinema with physical movement through space.” “In short,” he concludes, “time became a flat image or a landscape, something to look at or navigate through.”⁵ Conceptual transfers from one media to another harbor this transformation.

Emphasizing affect pushes “the virtual” beyond new media, as Case’s genealogy of the virtual in both theater and science suggests. Affect calls attention to the synesthesia of past and present, as the flattened landscape of historical time becomes not only a space of interactivity, but a zone of affective noise and distortion. Technological effects have correlative affects. As a form of temporal feedback, affective transfers resist the disorientation that sometimes accompanies conceptual transfer. Brian Massumi defines affects as “virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them.”⁶ Affective transfers are “anchored” in the unmooring of historical time itself; they perform our disorientation. They seek re-politicized perspectives amidst the virtual.

Queer theater and performance depends upon affective transfers to sustain a particular slant on temporality and continuity.⁷ Taylor Mac’s play, Red Tide Blooming, performed at PS122 in New York in 2006, sought to rescue affective fragments of a queer past in a manner comparable to Enid. In a kind of theatrical reverse-gentrification, Mac emplotted the apocalyptic end of Coney Island, and of all the gender freaks and sexual outlaws who thrive in it. The play sprang from a commission to honor drag legend Ethyl Eichelberger, and while Red Tide Blooming reflects her influence, it also protests a future that would quarantine her difference in nostalgia.⁸ Mac’s cast thus did double duty, playing their roles in the farce before stepping out of character (and into yet other characters) at the conclusion in order to reflect upon the current pace of change in New York. Generational succession, epitomized in the casting of downtown icon Ruby Lynn Reyner, played a ghost note throughout Mac’s madcap play. But historical fidelity only heightened the imperative to speak to present concerns.

Even the surrogates for the past in the play reflected this interdependency. One older character mock-apologetically told the crowd that, although her generation didn't manage to change the world, they did at least invent glitter.

This vision of a virtual history still in the process of becoming contrasts with the traditional conception of history as 'the past as it really was.' Indeed, it exposes this traditional conception as a fetish. It seems to me that the conceptual transfers of post-historical time enable such encounters, but do not of themselves politicize the past. "Navigating" through time is inherently ambivalent. It is not intrinsically queer, but it can be queered.

We encounter such queerings in recent art that engages the process re-enactors employ to reconstruct the habitus of past wars.⁹ They adopt the costumes, weapons, tactics, and sometimes even the foodstuffs, diseases, and names of past soldiers. Their hyper-attentiveness to verisimilitude — expressed in hostility towards "deviations" such as modern eyewear or female soldiers — contrasts with the exhilarating abandon they feel in navigating the past as present. The holy grail of historical reenactment, reports artist Allison Smith, is what re-enactors term "period rush": a powerful feeling of excitement, danger, or even fear when one has successfully downloaded into one's chosen historical moment. Period rush names a potentiality contained in a literally regimented framework. But even at its most literal-minded, a glimmer of the virtual can be discerned in this rush.

That reenactment, because of its regimentation, should be associated with political and cultural conservatism is less unusual than the fact that, nevertheless, progressive and queer artists remain drawn towards its possibilities. Jeremy Deller created The Battle of Orgreave (2001), a large scale reenactment of a

famous labor struggle from the 1980s. Like Red Tide Blooming, Orgreaves commemorated a traumatic defeat. In a public forum about the event, Deller discussed the participation of politically conservative re-enactors, recruited from various reenactment societies, who ostensibly supported the victors in this struggle.¹⁰ Aware of the artist's politics, many still participated. The period rush of reenactment overcame other concerns, and focusing on historical fidelity helped them avoid the thorny questions the performance raised. Even for its participants, then, Orgreaves remained ambivalent. But if reenactment risks reifying the past as it was, the transmission of affect permits us to reimagine as well as to repeat, inserting new subjectivities and new desires into familiar landscapes.

An embrace of the potentialities of the period rush characterizes two recent projects in queer art and performance: Allison Smith's participatory performance The Muster (2005) and Chris Vargas and Eric Stanley's film Homotopia (2006). Both projects approach the past through affective transfers that release the virtual element of an ostensibly settled historical record. Both do so by way of deviations that purist re-enactors and traditional historians might scoff at. Participating in the spatialization of historical time, they resist its debilitating political effects, in part by highlighting the artifice of reenactment itself. Both draw from sources that are themselves reenactments, constructing a moebius strip in which the pursuit of the real forever turns back out on the side of the virtual.

The Muster gathered artists, intellectuals, and enthusiasts for a two-day encampment on Governor's Island in New York City, in the spring of 2005. Inspired by Civil War re-enactors, but demurring from their devotion to the

politically confining details of the past, Smith issued a call to muster that asked each potential participant: “What are you fighting for?” Placing the onus upon the individual or small collective, reenactment changed from a pursuit of authentic detail to an active consideration of what the past meant to us, and how. Smith’s call to arms invited recruits to “Conjure your insurgent grandparents, bra-burning aunts, funny uncles, and the trans-revolutionaries who have paved the way for your life’s work. Summon your historical peers and chosen family throughout time, and the Causes for which they fought and bled.”¹¹ As a participant observer, I was struck by the intensity of homage to pasts real and imagined: a civil war uniform entirely in hues of pink; an old-fashioned mail carrier delivering one of the few hand-written letters I have received in years. Insisting upon incongruity, the Muster challenged the reality effect of traditional reenactment.

The optimism of Smith’s call ought not obviate what Jameson terms “the negative purpose” of any utopia.¹² One collective named Core¹³ flew a sign quoting New Orleans’ Sister Gertrude Morgan: “I No We Can Reign Here.” An apocalyptic evangelical might seem an unlikely inspiration for a genderqueer and transfeminist collective, but the appropriateness of the slogan in its new context bespeaks the bleed of affect across identitarian and ideological boundaries. The substitution of “no” for “know” reflected a spirit of negation secured to the utopian spirit. Much has been made recently of queer negativity,¹⁴ but Core’s homage suggests the compatibility between utopia and negation, based in the shared impulse to refuse a present context.

Plumbing even deeper into the affect of revolt, Homotopia also imagined a political utopianism for our dystopian present. Here reenactment was less as an

organizational principle than a strip of behavior spliced into filmic structure. Also opening with a call to arms, Homotopia took a playful but politically disgusted stance towards the current normalization of lesbian and gay politics in the United States. The film's refusal was accomplished in part through an affective transfer of the spirit of rebelliousness. The most relevant example of this was the citations of Gillo Pontecorvo's Italian neo-realist masterpiece, The Battle of Algiers (1966). Based on the Algerian War of Independence from France (1954-1962), The Battle of Algiers was a fictional film shot in documentary style using mostly non-professional actors.¹⁵ As with Sister Gertrude Morgan, The Battle of Algiers makes an unlikely historical influence for contemporary queer art. And yet Vargas and Stanley successfully reinvented key moments in the original film, such as a harrowing sequence in which several Algerian women cut their hair, apply makeup, and transform their appearance into a "modern" look, in order to infiltrate the French Quarter undetected and deliver their payload of explosive devices. Reminiscent of Enid's chameleonic shifts in Ghost World, Vargas and Stanley ingeniously adapted this scene into one where a band of gender outlaws assimilate their appearance to the norms of the deserving queer subject, all the better to disrupt an upcoming gay nuptial with their particular brand of chaos. Both José Muñoz and Jasbir Puar have written about the affinities between queer and terrorist bodies.¹⁶ Homotopia playfully but seriously delves into the historical resonances of this affinity, signaling both the desperation and hope of the gender outlaw destined, like the insurrectionary citizens of Algiers, to lose the battle but perhaps not, ultimately, the war.

In these examples, to conclude, we encounter an affective engagement with the past that cannot be reduced to conservation or nostalgia. Enid does not

want to become a 1970s punk, Smith a civil war soldier (or re-enactor), Vargas and Stanley subjects of French colonization. Rather, reenactment seeks a presencing of the past, locating it squarely in the virtual. We tend to associate the virtual with the future and the futuristic, but Case helps us see how it illuminates theater and performance history as well. The demise of linear historical narrative, traditional and hierarchical archives, and a fidelity to the fact as objective and unalterable datum of the past has been much lamented.¹⁷ What the politics of the period rush suggest, however, is that we are not in the position to opt out of the Great Upload. Our political imaginations must find their orientation not beyond but within its dynamic, guarding against any nostalgia for the historical foundations. History marches on, but glitter sticks in its floorboards.

Notes

¹ Terry Zwigoff, "Ghost World," (USA: 2001), vol. My queer reading of the film is supported by the lesbian undercurrent in the Enid/Rebecca relationship that is made explicit in the graphic novel on which the film is based, and also by the transgender identification implied in Enid Coleslaw's very name, which is an anagram of the name of her male creator. Daniel Clowes, Ghost World (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 1998).

² Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³ Lev Manovich, The Language of New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), Sue-Ellen Case, Performing Science and the Virtual, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁴ Case, Performing Science and the Virtual 5.

⁵ Manovich, The Language of New Media 47,78.

⁶ Brian Massumi, Parables for the Virtual : Movement, Affect, Sensation, Post-Contemporary Interventions (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) 35.

⁷ See also Judith Halberstam, In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

⁸ Joe Jeffreys, "An Outré Entrée into the Para-Ridiculous Histrionics of Drag Diva Ethyl Eichelberger: A True Story," Theatre History Studies.14 (1994).

⁹ On historical reenactment in living museums, see Scott Magelssen, "Performance Practices of [Living] Open-Air Museums (and a New Look At "Skansen" In American Living Museum Discourse," Theatre History Studies.24 (2004).

¹⁰ Clark Symposium: Ahistoric Occasion: The Uses of History in Contemporary Art Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA. February 23 - February 24, 2007.

¹¹ Allison Smith, The Muster: A Project of the Public Art Fund (New York: Public Art Fund, 2007) 47.

¹² Fredric Jameson, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions (New York: Verso, 2005) 7. I am grateful to Tianna Kennedy for leading me to this quotation.

¹³ Core consisted of Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Math Bass, Leidy Churchman, Ryder Cooley, Bruce Mingles, Edie Fake, Megan Palaima, Pony and James Tsang.

¹⁴ Lee Edelman, No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ The Battle of Algiers became a touchstone for the left, and even has its admirers in the military-industrial complex, who screen it as a cautionary document of urban insurrection. Like Orgreaves, The Battle of Algiers is unquestionably on the side of the rebels. But its vivid and imaginative accuracy does not lead to a single propagandistic message.

¹⁶ Jasbir Puar, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," Social Text.72 (2002), José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers

of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁷ See the debate reprised in Keith Jenkins, The Postmodern History Reader (London ; New York: Routledge, 1997).