

CLINT BURNHAM  
TELEVISION ON THE RADIO:  
YOU BLOW ME, YOU'VE BOUGHT ME

**ISABELLE PAUWELS**

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Isabelle Pauwels' new exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery assumes a tripartite structure: a projection, a video, a book assembly. In turn, each of these components breaks down: the projection shows an electronic typewriter typing out dictionary definitions; the video's sound emits from a microphone; and the book assembly line creates a book in three parts. Finally, selected components of those break-downs can be further analysed. The dictionary definitions in the projection are for three terms: gallery, galley, and galley slave. The video's use of a microphone as speaker suggests a certain ghost in the machine, in the gallery, the guise of an actual speaker (again, three speakers: on the video itself — Pauwels' mouth that we see at a microphone; the absent speaker that would "properly" emit the sound of the video; and the gallerygoer as speaker, first raising the mike to his/her mouth and then, realizing that sound is coming out of it, putting it to his/her ear). And the book assembly structure then opens up to the structure of a commercial gallery: the artist is willing to make copies — editions — of her manuscript but in a performative labour that mimics the relationship of artist (galley slave) to gallery (galley).

Let us examine one element of Pauwels' project in greater detail. *More or Less Square* is a book made up of three parts. The first is a compilation of log sheets for a reality television show, *The Smiths*. It is produced on a grid, using a contemporary word processing program. The second part of *More or Less Square* is an account of the early days of television, when broadcasts were still being carried out from radio studios. This part is typed with an electronic typewriter onto bookkeeping ledger forms. The third part of *More or Less Square* is a stage play, typed with a manual typewriter.

Pauwels' intention is to produce individual copies of the book on demand, at a rate of \$8 per hour (the B.C.

minimum wage). The first part will be simply printed from a computer, and she will type the second and third parts; she estimates that the entire process will take anywhere from twenty to thirty hours. The final price will be double what her labour costs are, as the gallery typically receives a 50% commission: what Marx called surplus-value.

It is this tripartite structure of the book, of *More or Less Square*, a structure having to do with temporality, drama, and labour, that interests me here. For, following Žižek and Jameson, is this structure not first of all the contemporary historicity of classical (or realist), modern, and postmodern culture? And, then, the Lacanian structure of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real?

First of all, the book itself exists (in a kind of obverse of "gallery/galley/galley slave," which is a projection of a typewritten book) as the transcript of different forms of drama, somewhere between a script (whether for film, television, or play), a transcription (of live action), and a book proper (for which these would presumably be galleys, or the rough drafts used in the printing process).

The content of the three sections of *More or Less Square* is unimportant: a bickering family, a paranoid television pioneer, squabbling actors ordering each other around. This is the reality of the Hobbesian order: family life is reduced to the predictable vulgar-Freudian drama of profanity, incest, and simulated drinking (interestingly, a recent *New York Times* article claims that many reality television shows feature almost unlimited drinking); early television is characterized by a well-nigh oral fixation on consuming the product placement; and the theatrical section degenerates into a phantasy of cybersex and hectoring actors.

This putative content is overwhelmed by the form of the book's presentation: the reality television script is as raw

as the footage it supposedly documents, spread out as it is into columns and grids; the early television transcript, typed sideways onto green ledger sheets, reads more as found text; and the theatrical script is the most problematic from any standard of literary competence, being rife with typos of the kind only found in manual typescripts (spaces between the first letter of a word and the remainder of the word, or the first letter of a word attached to the end of the previous word, etc.).

We've heard of good bad painting, or paintings that offer a deskilling of competence as a critique of modernism: what about good bad writing? In a Canadian context, the pioneer of this genre was probably Toronto's Crad Kilodney, who, after years of working as a reader for a New York vanity press, started self-publishing books of his own fantastic stories, characterized by paper-thin characters, howler clichés, and plots that weren't so much unbelievable (although they were that, too) as unrepeatabe. Kilodney's titles alone give an indication of his (lack of) literary pretensions: *Bloodsucking Monkeys from North Tonawanda*, *Putrid Scum*, *Excrement*, *Lighting Struck My Dick*.

But ... this is to get sucked into the content of Pauwels' work, a content, I am contending, that is much less interesting than its form — the lurid nature of that content notwithstanding. Or, rather, strike that; the lurid nature of the book's content (what I call above its "predictable vulgar-Freudian drama") is the *very reason* to overlook the content in favour of its formalism.

So let us return to this notion of a trilogy, a tripartite structure. Again, these various trinities suggest themselves from critical theory: Raymond Williams' "emerging-dominant-residual," Jameson's "realism-modernism-post-modernism," and Freud's "Oral-Anal-Genital." Using each

of these structures, I think, can finally tell us much more about the dynamics of Pauwels' art.

Williams' set of historical terms come from his book *Marxism and Literature*, and luckily, therefore, are contiguous to the quasi-literary text under discussion. For Williams, no cultural style is entirely dominant: there will always be residual styles that hang on from an earlier era, and emergent styles that, while not necessarily dominant (and perhaps never to be), nonetheless have some hold in the contemporary moment. This is where the first unusual historicity of Pauwels' project strikes one: I refer to her use of a manual typewriter, electronic typewriter, and then computer for the three components of *More or Less a Square*. Pauwels herself addresses this conundrum in her introduction to Part Two: "Why am I assigning the task of recording events that should have occurred in the 1920s and 1930s to an invention debuting September 14, 1956? I will answer that question in part: as Part Two exists between Parts One and Three, so, chronologically, the electronic typewriter is situated between the computer and the manual typewriter." Thus two systems of technological history are roughly aligned: writing and drama.

Another way of aligning these stars might be as follows: when would the three writing systems have fallen into Williams' history? In the 1970s and 1980s, when a manual typewriter was residual, a relic going out of date, the electronic typewriter was dominant — certainly in the business world, and the computer or word processor was emergent, not yet a common household item. And is this not the very moment of video technology that Pauwels herself is nostalgic for — from her "If you can't finance your fiction, shut the fuck up" to the lost history of early television, which "would have yielded early examples of 1970s video art"?

As for Jameson's triad realism-modernism-postmodernism, perhaps we can adjust this historicity, with the aid of TJ Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*, and align each of these cultural periodizations to first, early capitalism (realism being the style of the emergent bourgeoisie); socialist revolution (modernism being, in Clark's analysis, coeval with socialism); and late capitalism or globalization (postmodernism being its cultural logic, as Jameson has so forcefully theorized). In this analysis, the production line of Pauwels' book assembly matches the early days of factory production — as she indicates with references to the neighbourhood of the gallery, a neighbourhood of small-scale clothing production and sweatshops. Then, the projection "Gallery/galley/galley slave" amounts to a critique of capitalism (which begins, according to Steve McCaffery, when you open a dictionary): a critique of the forms of exploitation and labour endemic even to the culture industry (whether the book industry — galleys — or the art industry — the gallery). Finally, the "If you can't finance" video, posited as it is in the style of 1970s video, returns us to the beginning of postmodern art, a modest beginning that has, for the past ten years, been the subject of intense interest in contemporary art.

What then of the Freudian triumvirates? First Freud: surely the history of drama amounts to his theories of the development of human sexuality. At first we have the stage, a

matter of declamation — be it Greek tragedy or Beckett's absurdism — can this not be the oral stage (Terry Eagleton has recently remarked that in the "mouth" as actor in *Not I*, Beckett retreated to a place where "meaning and materialism mysteriously converge")? And then early television, with its sweating body (in Pauwels' script, broadcasts are made from cramped radio studios, and the klieg lights bake the actors) — is this not the anal stage, in which the subject is keenly aware of what his body excretes? And finally, reality television: the triumph of the genital or phallic stage, the full-blown entry of the sexualized subject (so much so that it is the polymorphous perversity of the reality television script that re-emerges in the theatrical Part Three, as a form of regression).

But this glossing (glossary, glossolalia) on the abundance of triads (triumvirate, triptych) in Isabelle Pauwels' artwork ignores, I think, a key structural element. Let us return to gallery/galley/galley slave. What is unusual about this series, what is missing and what is extraneous? First, then, while the first two terms — gallery and galley — speak of institutional and material spaces, the last term — galley slave — announces a subjectivity. And, too, if this is the excess to the triad, what is missing? The *gallery* slave, of course. That absent subject — who is absent even while being plainly present, but only as an overall Labour Ready-type temp — is she not also, finally, determined by the very structural aporia with which Pauwels struggles?