

Toward a Theory of Entertainment

This document is intended to be a comprehensive definition of the principles of Entertainment. While comprehensive, it is in no way exhaustive and as such contributions or re-definitions are strongly encouraged. This theory is based largely on my own observations and reflections, which by their very nature are incomplete and fragmented.

As it turns out the eyes of Academe have not cast themselves on this subject very much at all. While there is study of the Entertainment Industry, there is virtually nothing on the principals that make up entertainment itself. This work is important to me for very obvious reasons. Currently, I am an Assistant Professor at an historically black institution. Certainly one would be hard pressed to find an industry that has been more lucrative, accepting or generous to African-Americans than has entertainment. Nearly all of the wealthiest African-Americans of the previous century became so through the entertainment industry.

Entertainment theory in my mind is first and foremost grounded in the notion of spectacle, something that is remarkable or impressive in nature. Thus, it follows that humans would declare the antithesis of entertainment – boring, as something that is not remarkable or impressive. This need for common stimulation, variety and superior sensual vivaciousness is at the core of what we call entertainment.

We become stimulated by the spectacle of basketball games, for example, and rather than watch the same game over and over again, we demand a variety of opponents, coupled with the sensuality of victory and causal relationships. Television is, at least in America, the number one entertainment vehicle. It is in fact nothing short of a spectacle to witness a small black box reproduce images and sounds with such exact precision be it from the moon, the other side of the world, or at any other live event. Lacking sufficient variety

we may exclaim “there is nothing on TV” which more accurately conveys “there is nothing on that I have not seen before thus, I am not stimulated.”

I can remember my first encounters with boredom. Sitting in the back seat of a car, obligated to endure endless country roads that seemed uninteresting and indeed irksome at the time. The speed with which I encountered this endless parade of farms, telephone poles and pavement only seemed entertaining at first. Insulated by the moving vehicle, it was not until I had to get out and walk those roads that I truly began to appreciate the spectacle before me. I must admit, while walking country roads, was not boring, it certainly was not entertaining either.

This calls in the element that first moves entertainment beyond spectacle is not the term “fun” but instead is a prerequisite of fun – safety. One can only be entertained while one is safe, free from harm and in some way distanced from an uncertain outcome. We like to pretend that the monsters are real, and during Orson Welles’ 1931 Halloween “War of the Worlds” radio show we actually believed they were. But this is clearly the exception rather than the norm, no matter how frightening television, movies or any entertainment may become, we all instinctively know that it is not real.

Roller coasters on the other hand are quite real and while enormously entertaining to some, promote the notion of fear. Yet, they would not be fun if several people were killed or injured during each run of the ride. In fact, it is that confidence of safety that allows some to enjoy roller coasters while others do not. Even waiting in line can be entertaining as patrons anxiously await their turn to come face to face with their greatest fear, which in an of itself is a spectacle.

Morbidity is generally an ingredient of entertainment. For example, the inevitable vomit that comes after the roller coaster ride while truly a spectacle is not necessarily entertaining for those who care for the victim. But to others who have the safety of distance, it can be a source of humor that promotes superiority over the sick patron.

Even our most glib entertaining movies such as The Sound of Music, or The Wizard of Oz, contain within them the threat of death either of the person or of a relationship, which promotes the anxiety of the hero. From our safe distance, it is entertaining, yet even if we were to believe that Judy Garland or Julie Andrews herself were actually about to die we would still find it morbidly entertaining to witness the spectacle of an actual death. If, however, this were to occur in real life to us as humans it would not be entertaining.

Thus, I feel that fun, is not as important an element as safety and that spectacle, the most important element of entertainment, can only occur when the senses are confronted by reality in some way. To be insulated from reality is to deny spectacle its opportunity to manifest itself in the human being. Death or the ending of a relationship is a critical ingredient in spectacle.

Safety and Survival

Key in any discussion of entertainment is the fulfillment of the basic needs for human survival. If for example, one must struggle each day to find food, clothing and shelter, the premise of a romance will in all likelihood not entertain. In order to achieve so powerful a feeling as romance, or melodrama one must first satisfy or compromise the natural anger that comes from living in destitution within a realm of plenty.

If we look for example at the music of the Beatles, Elton John or even Michael Jackson, one can clearly see (I believe) the power of romantic feelings which occur within the context of a bourgeois lifestyle. Compare this to the anger present in John Coltrane, James Brown and even Bruce Springsteen, and it becomes clear how survival could never be taken for granted by the latter group. Even the romantic music of Luther VanDross, Marvin Gaye and Billy Joel has within it the element of competition, of struggle, and the need to overcome. Romance and sexuality is seen as a release or a liberation from oppressive forces. For Gaye romance becomes an excuse for expressing powerful emotions that have to do with white male superiority.

Perhaps in no way is this movement more clear than in the modern Hip-Hop "Gangsta" Rap music which threatens all notions of bourgeois decency. Disillusioned with romance, the (primarily) black male singer creates an unfiltered emission of his anger at the struggle for survival and racism against everything that comes into view. Like a tornado of frenetic energy the Rapper has no time for marriage, reflection or prolonged contemplation.

This calls into question the notion of romance and marriage itself as phenomena. The German Filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder was once quoted as saying "marriage is the single most effective and insidious tool for social repression." It has long been the excuse of married men that they cannot overthrow the government or fight for a cause because the family "needs them." Hence marriage not only assures the survival and success of the male species, but also of the dominant civilization. Marriage as we know it does not exist without romance.

So there are very important class distinctions that must be evaluated when defining "what is entertainment." An interesting quote I overheard on the radio during this last election stated that "Democrats enjoy football, while Republicans enjoy golf." This quote seems to be saying that the lower class people enjoy violence and anger, while the wealthy enjoy more leisurely sports. Certainly the association of anger and class emerges from a sense of frustration. In football men are often wounded for life as a by product of the sport, in the same way that there is nothing easy or leisurely about the struggle of poor and working class people to survive from day to day.

Anger and frustration also exists at simply being ignored, which is yet another source of frustration for certain minorities and poor people. Of course, some entertainers such as Ralph Ellison take advantage of this phenomenon with his novel Invisible Man.

The existence of this complexity indicates the source of and intended audience for the entertainment.

Music and time

Clearly one can gauge or measure the impact or power of a spectacle by its relationship to time. When engaged in a live spectacle that perhaps threatens our very existence time can seem to “stand still”, and when wounded by gunfire or some sort of accident, part of the shock can occur because of the suddenness of the event. I think of a car accident, just before impact the moment is generally frozen in our minds eye like a photograph, but the actual impact and the shock thereof is sudden and elusive.

No example of this relationship is as strong as a single event in the huge spectacle Saving Private Ryan (Spielburg, USA, 1999). One of the soldiers during the Normandy landing hears and feels a bullet ricochet off of his helmet. In a state of surprise and gratitude the soldier takes off his helmet to admire it. Time seems to stand still. In a second he is dead as another bullet hits him in his head.

This manipulation of time calls to mind the subjectivity of time which is (supposed) to be a scientific principle. However as experiments have shown, a clock placed in the basement of a building invariably runs faster than one several floors above it due to the effect of gravity. Perhaps more striking is a pass in a football game. To the Quarterback the ball must arrive at a single point at the same time as the receiver, thus it is timed. To the coach and/or the fans, the ball may seem to hang in the air for a long time, but to the receiver it arrives in uncomfortably sudden period of time.

Yet, for all the discussion of the relationship between time, spectacle and entertainment, there is no more pervasive manipulator of time as music. Musicians, fans and observers note that in music one is “keeping” time. As if it is wrapped in box or blanket to be packaged and stored. Instead the pulse or rhythm of music distorts our internal notion of time and thus creates a spectacle within our bodies.

Everything about our being works in its own time. The heartbeats at a certain often fluctuating rhythm, the blood flows in another rhythm, our ears hear in a certain patterns

and even neurons fire according a preconditioned cadence. Music with its powerful and singular beat overwhelms these biological functions in some way and in the act of this process our body is altered thus causing an internal spectacle. We may close our eyes and experience visions or think pleasing thoughts because our senses have in fact been enveloped by the power of this spectacle.

At its conclusion we generally long for the feeling again and want more. When the rhythm is accompanied by words and linguistics the effect can be enhanced as we entertain ourselves in the struggle for meaning, pattern and familiarity. It is said that music can touch the very soul of a person. This spectacle must occur when there a strong relationship of familiarity in feeling between audience and entertainer.

So music in and of itself is a perfect entertainment. It is safe, creates an internal spectacle (until the music is put to visuals or video), ignites feelings, manipulates time, and if successful creates melancholy or longing at its ending due to the pleasure of its experience.

Passion and Metaphor

Feelings and passion are as much a part of the spectacle as is the search for meaning. When confronted by a spectacle and overwhelmed by it our emotions are opened up and we form a relationship with the artist or creator of the entertainment. In its most popular or base form entertainment is passion at its highest we see connections and relationships which are abstract in nature.

Yet, even along these lines distinctions of class, race or history can be drawn. If we consider worship within the Christian Religion an entertainment (for purposes of proof only); a difference exists between the elaborate metaphor of the Catholic Church and the passion within the black Protestants. The simple truths and repetition of the black church contrasts the enormous symbolism and intellect preferred by Catholics. Contrast any scene from a film by Andrei Tarkovsky versus the uncomplicated pleasure of

pornography. Contrast the universal appeal of soap operas and game shows versus the rarified serenity of documentary or classical music.

However, empathy, compassion and understanding remain ubiquitous in the creation and participation of entertainment. Of all things I dislike - sitting through meetings is my repugnance. To me it is an anathema to entertainment. Perhaps in addition to my distaste for didacticism, I also feel no empathy or compassion toward the leaders of meetings. I would argue however that it is they who have no compassion or understanding of me.

Either way it is a failure of entertainment, and every entertainer must at some level have a feeling for the experience his or her audience. Often they have no idea what that experience will be or has been, but they present based on hunch or intuition. Many educators or information professionals would argue that “meetings or information are not entertainment,” but this I believe is a subjective view.

Other elements of entertainment include comedy, sexuality, and truth.