

Theatre, An Individual Like You or Me

Alexander Cochrane

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney

Cigarettes shrivelled and dried up in the gutter, thick city smog of a twenty first century metropolis and a small bearded man curled into the warmth of his only blanket. It isn't till you approach the rustic bench perched affront the Box Office of the Capitol Theatre that Campbell Street, a one-way hyperlink between two main roads, earns some points for cultural hotpot. The site, however, exceeds a dash of this and that with a few other worldly flavours, stirred and simmered for a couple theatrical seasons. The place is, in itself, a whole experience; an adventure above the culture of Sydney's metropolis and through that of other times, other civilisations and philosophies. It's a pastiche in its most literal sense; what results is a small step through an arched doorway, and a leap into a whole new dimension of appropriation.

Frederic Jameson once said pastiche is merely a form of 'blank parody' (Hoesterey 2001, px) but I couldn't disagree more. Pastiche is an opportunity to enrich sentience; grant raw feelings to the most seemingly inanimate. Even before I walk in, carved out of the walls of the entrance is a procession of attenuated columns. So simple, yet so elegant. Reminiscent of the ornate style of Roman wall paintings, attenuated columns are famous for their attention to finesse and the mythological (Murray 2003, p14). Already, before I make my way over that small marble step into the theatre's foyer, I feel like I understand the place; I understand what it wants to be. It longs to be sophisticated and graceful yet not willing to part from the grandiose of experiencing what it has to offer. Pastiche is far more than just copying something that looks pretty; it's coordinating your ideas with the old and recontextualising them in terms of what you have to offer.

All history, I have come to believe, is the history of colonisation, because all of us get to where we are from somewhere else (Gillen and Ghosh 2006, p.14)

Although pastiche is often considered a postmodern frame of thought, its practical application also applies throughout modernity and its history. Gillen and Ghosh recognise many cultures and colonies were formed out of principles behind other cultures and, hence, what appears to be an Australian identity is in fact a concoction of many other resultant nationalisms, adopted and recontextualised through their representation of our history (White 1997, p17). Walking down this street 180 years ago, the place was a thriving market; the go-to Sydney centre for your most essential needs. By 1860 new train lines had developed too far away for convenience and so the hay markets packed up and moved over the hill. It is a consequence of these glory days that the "New Belmore Market", a glamorous wholesale market constructed over the dying site, embellished a culture from the past and integrated a new identity of intricacy and extravagant living. In the Town Clerk's 1892 Annual Report, the clerk indicates that even in the ruckus of 19th century colonialism, an era in the midst of modernity's biggest developments, pastiche formed a part of individualisation; "the ornamentation of terracotta work having a very pleasing effect, relieving the eye from

the terrible whiteness and sameness of our ordinary cement plastered architecture” (Murray 2003, p8).

By provoking themes that are commonly seen as heavily rooted in modernity, the site has resulted in a work that can be just as easily seen as postmodern. This is a result of acting on these ideas from various cultural perspectives, thereby refiguring them in the context of contemporary philosophy (Hoesterey 2001). The radical make-over of the site provided new knowledges, challenging what colonial Australia believed to be the cultural force behind it. New technologies introduced new perceptions on basic social constructs such as power, wealth and politics. In a dramatic twist of irony, the New Belmore Markets had to be shut down within twenty years after being out shadowed by the monolithic stamp on Australian territory that is the Queen Victoria Building, constructed just around the corner by the same architect George McRae. Unfortunately the site would enjoy little success for almost a century, until a time when cultures of the past out value colossal constructions of the latest technology. This is evident in the Capitol theatre’s protection by the New South Wales Heritage Council, placing an ICO (interim conservation order) on the then picture-palace from 1979-81 (Murray 2003, p12). Furthermore, this initiated growing public support over the next decade which fought council attempts to have it demolished and triumphed to have it restored with a modern twist. This demonstrates a conscious social transformation around the key modern cornerstone of progression and development through constant flux; the public remains aware of its history and found its physical manifestations to trump additions to the growing concrete jungle of inner Sydney.

It feels other-worldly, walking around inside. From the gothic lamp posts that decorate the ivory stairways to the elaborately textured renaissance-esque wallpaper, it forces me to welcome an overwhelming sense of knowledge, culturality and sophistication. It’s rather interesting, how identity can be manifested in the physical despite it being entirely intangible. In reality, they’re more than superficially elegant lamp posts and walls; they’re a form of expression. They feel true, they appear true, they construct what it means to be a part of Capitol theatre by means of reinvention. It transports me through a portal to newfound realities in the midst of familiar aesthetics.

Morley (1996, p53) claims “according to some commentators, postmodernism is a particular cultural experience, a ‘structure of feeling’ or ‘cultural logic’,” he claims these are based in a shift between social and economic structures. Pastiche facilitates consciousness of these boundaries by imposing an acute juxtaposition of cultures between doorways of the Capitol. However, Morley also claims “postmodernist art tends to be... local rather than grandiose or universalist,” (1996, p57) which would strengthen the claim that pastiche is a postmodern tool created through modern mediums and techniques. More specifically, this aligns with the concept of ‘bricolage’ which, according to Gérard Genette, is “the making of something new out of something old,” (Hoesterey 2001, p10) and is a form of hypertextuality. It is here that we can stipulate the Capitol theatre’s presentation of multiple cultures integrates, with its own aesthetics and identity, manifestations of a plethora of cultural links and histories.

Baudrillard (2001) takes this as a signifier of the hyperreal, where reality has disappeared and all we're left with are the stereotypes that non-originals have left us to assume as truth. It could be argued this flaws the theory of bricolage and pastiche by diversifying the Capitol theatre's identity, however this is only by presuming the theatre is concerned with these original 'truths'. On the contrary, the theatre's design relies on these hyperrealities, the simulacra, to present explorations into the theatre in the clearest, most sensical form. The theatre takes these conceptions as a tool to suffuse into its audience a unique experience defined by its own intricacies.

As I take my steps past the promenade of pylons, I can't help but feel like I've teleported through time. Soft, velvet blue carpet shoots across from the checkered tiles behind me. A large, platinum bar sits vivid though somewhat nonchalant beside a souvenir outlet. It is standing alone, on the verge of materialist territory, that I am reminded rather astutely that I am here, in the 21st century, in preparations for witnessing a monster of theatrical production.

It is this stark reality that strikes me as most confusing about the nature of this premises. Is the Capitol theatre merely a facade plastered over profit-driven mass theatre production? On one hand, we have an artistically sound construction of multiple cultures which cohesively unite to produce an experience like no other. Take a few steps forward and you're plunged back into a principally capitalist driven environment. The question, however, is whether this is merely financial backing to allow the theatre to live on through a capitalist world or, perhaps, it is an example of Marx's proposition that the bourgeoisie have "given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption" (Marx and Engels 1848, p2). Perhaps a play has become merely a form of commodity and capitalised a specifically anti-commodification class; a higher culture, if you will. The answer, however, can not simply be divided into a this or that algorithm. Rather, one could even argue there is no answer at all. It could be stipulated that the commodification of art only gives it greater value to the audience, giving them more reason to submerge themselves into new cultures. However, just as similarly it could be argued commodification has left no bonds, no links between people and "callous 'cash payment'," (Marx and Engels 1848, p2) and hence left us with a harsh void of institutionalisation.

Isaiah Berlin, in commenting on Kant's moral philosophy, acknowledges "the most important distinguishing characteristic of human beings is their freedom to act, to choose between, at the very least, two courses of action, two alternatives" (1996, p235). This liberty is a seminal aspect in the dogma which propel the age of the Enlightenment. Could it hence be said that, rather than providing scrutiny towards the establishments of capitalism and nostalgia, the Capitol theatre offers the audience the decision to embrace each at their own will, and hence is fervently grounded in modern stylistics? In this sense, the theatre's design is split between a pastiched entrance foyer and a contemporary communal space, making it on a whole more of a collage, collaborating separate ideas to showcase their dichotomous natures (Hoesterey 2001, p11). Perhaps, even, this is but an elaborate diptych, each space presenting a different side to what has constructed the beauty in the theatre's identity. The trouble is, although freedom of choice is a chief factor of humanity within the modern person, these questions are not answerable and, hence, are not genuine questions in the context of modernity (Berlin 1996, p170), rather they are physical actions. To believe is in itself embracing one's freedom. The owners do not impose their own beliefs

around what this collage might mean as that would imprison their audience's sentience and dignity. Consequently, we can accurately state that much of the theatre's stylistics, although based in postmodern techniques and tools, are firmly grounded in modern philosophy. In addition, however, this is not to say the Capitol theatre can no longer express its individuality through these techniques as it relies on this grounding in modernity to communicate its experience with finesse and sophistication.

An official welcomes us to find our seats as he carefully opens a set of double doors, revealing a golden vine rail that leads me into the vast enclosure that is the theatre itself. Murals, detailing and sculpted walls imitate the high culture of a countless number of civilisations. I see in the distance a reproduction of Venus De Medici above the stage, concealing herself from the actors and overlooking the elaborately styled garden roof terrace, standing in a rose-paved archway. I'm bumped by an old man from behind, eager to get to his seat ahead where perhaps his vision might permit a complete viewing experience. He mumbles something along the lines of the place being better while it was falling apart; less people meant better characters. I struggle to understand.

The few moments of solace between audience silence and introductory vibrato are crucial; I see the theatre in terms of what it was designed for. John Ebersson, architect of the Capitol Picture Palace adapted his emerging design from Chicago, known as an 'atmospheric' theatre (Murray 2003, p9), which attempted to replicate sitting beneath the stars in a Greek amphitheater through illusion of extravagant decoration and lighting. Sitting here, at this very moment, I can't explain how real it feels. It only lacks that crisp, European air.

Imagine yourself seated in a beautiful, old world, Florentine garden. Above, the blue Mediterranean sky. Stars twinkle. Clouds float by as if in silent admiration of the beauty encased in those creeper clad palace walls below. -The Capitol News, April, 1927 (Murray, 2003, p. 9)

Henri Lefebvre (1971, p31) sees space as a social construction; it is an historical product which can be likened to merchandise, existing only by endorsing the wishes of its owners. He says space can be studied in terms of its contents or, in the case of the Capitol theatre, the audience. This extract testifies to the Capitol theatre constructing a space on the basis of historical and global narrative. By likening the space itself to iconic features of affluent tourism attractions, Capitol theatre redefines its space to make it entirely individual in the midst of Sydney theatre (Murray 2003, p10). If we look at space in a similar context to identity, capitol theatre embraces pastiche and constructs a new experience, seemingly disparate from the reality of the situation but designed to endow the audience with unseen knowledges of the potential in contemporary society. This is physically manifested in the 'atmospheric' design through a vast and complex lighting system which subtly illuminates the roof to appear as a night sky, looking down and watching over the theatrical productions. Physical manifestations are seminal to providing a holistic experience, and this is particularly enlightened in the context of contemporary theatre design. Nightingale

(1998, p8) says “A ‘theatre’ in the 1990s may be an attic, a basement, a segment of a street, or anywhere two or three come to perform and six or seven to watch.” In the midst of a growing theatrical sub-culture of underground performances to small, intimate audiences, the Capitol theatre’s sheer capacity made it ideal for holding international plays and to assume the role of Sydney’s new Lyric Theatre (Murray, 2003).

I’ve always been skeptical of intermissions. I was once a supporting role in a play and that fifteen minutes saw me anxiously rocking back and forth by the heater reciting over and over the next act. As the lights welcome us to stand, a small splintered mass scurry through the doors to squeeze themselves a drink and a smoke. Most people decide to stay put, stretch their legs a little. I, however, can’t help but return to the room painted with pastiche. Hopefully a smaller crowd will help me decipher what’s going on around there.

A firmly Romanticist introduction to modernity revolves around the idea of virtue, not as knowledge, but as a sign of dignified life. Berlin (1996, p184) says the virtuous are not bound by ordinary laws - psychological, social, even physical - resulting from the liberty that “we can alter anything... as our imagination chooses.” This is grounded in the belief that what we are, each one of us - you, me, him, her - we’re all products of what’s inside us; social constructs do not affect our individuality. Furthermore, our imagination is in touch with the true nature of ourselves.

I do not find them [values] as objective constituents of the universe which I must obey; I choose them freely myself. - Berlin 1996, p. 243

However, how does this assist us in seeking pastiche as a form of individuality? Surely, if individuality comes from within, Capitol theatre lacks a character at all! Structures of modern thought are anchored in the individual and their place in human society as freethinkers. The Capitol theatre, however, is not a freethinking body. It is, ultimately, an expression to represent the conscience of the public’s affiliations with its past. Walking around the entrance hall once again, I find it’s so much easier to read, to synthesise what I’m looking at than amongst a mass of eager musical consumers. The Capitol theatre is taking on an extensively intricate series of metanarratives that revolve around ancient class systems, and using them to present itself as “the great Capitol” (Murray 2003, p10). It has become more apparent that the symmetrical staircases to my left and right, ascend above, onto a fort-like establishment, embellished by renaissance-esque wall reliefs. Pastiche grows closer with individualism by means of facilitating expression.

Suffusing into the pastiche of the theatre’s identity is now a huge construction with overtones of defense, solidarity and colossus. It seems to string everything together, providing fluency between the many fallen civilisations that remain standing in this room. It is my knowledge of these societies that educates my grasp on the adventure the site has endured to get to where it is today. Pastiche extends individualism past its affiliation with modernity and into a new realm of reinvention. It has been recontextualised to form a basis of reciprocity and distinction of expression and it has

become a consequence of this that Capitol theatre can be seen as a conflict, rather than a dichotomy, between modern capitalist systemic totems and the postmodern tools which present them. This is formed in the basis that the theatre's stylistics are a form of poetic dissemination and, hence, allow it to express itself, displaying the values which sustain its individuality. Pastiche survives as a critical catalyst for these values to work cohesively through physical manifestations.

As I scan the grounds, I notice I've lost track of time. There's not much to be seen but what I've already pondered. The people are gone. How long was I thinking for? I walk over to squeeze through the large double doors to tune in for the end of the musical but the doors are locked. I hear a shrill, melodramatic wail from behind the doors. I guess some matters are unquestionable. I have, in fact, missed the second half of a ticket I paid solid money for. I hate intermissions.

Notes on Contributor

Alexander Cochrane studies public communications majoring in advertising at the University of Technology Sydney.

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