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Heavy Load: The Love Child of Johnny Rotten and Audrey Hepburn.

Friday 8th May 2009, TaPRA Study Day, Manchester University

My focus is on work that seeks to challenge or reposition constructions of learning disability, and the operation of the aesthetic within this primarily social agenda. In particular, I'd like to consider the role of beauty, and some considerations for the agreement of principled positions that inform a return to *beauty* – or maybe more accurately, *beauties* to incorporate other kinds of beauty than the purely formal. Underlying my provocation is a proposition that beauty cannot be considered in isolation; that is, it can't be separated from the ideological values that it affirms, and it cannot be privileged over other strands of art that interrelate with it to create meaning. In particular, I'll focus on the relationship between beauties and intelligences, leading to a reflection on the punk band Heavy Load, an integrated group of learning disabled and non-disabled musicians heavily influenced by The Sex Pistols. Through its aesthetics, the band challenges the values contained in conventional representations of learning disability.

Jenny Morris exposes such values by extending a feminist perspective on beauty to the arena of disability when she writes '[t]o be considered beautiful is to give value to the absence of physical 'impairment'...Just as beauty – and goodness – are defined by the absence of disability, so ugliness – and evil – are defined by its presence' (Morris, 1991, p.21). People with learning disabilities can also be implicated in this opposition between beauty and disability, which acts as a mechanism and justification for exclusion, not least exclusion from professional performance.

Perhaps more contentious for people with learning disabilities, though, is the privileging of intelligence in the production and reception of art. Maybe because we admire it as a quality of the artist or ourselves as readers, we are less suspicious when it is used representationally. Here, as with beauty, a binary exists that distinguishes learning disabled people from non-disabled people. Non-disabled people possess intellect, the capacity to progress, to respond, to reflect, develop and change in relation to observation and experience, in short, they can learn. People with learning disabilities alternatively inherit wisdom, insights into allegedly eternal human truths which are used to place beyond debate any platitude the artist wants to. This inverts the morality of beauty; disability here is good, while non-disability has the capacity for good or evil depending on whether it accepts or rejects the wisdom offered. *Rain Man* (1989) is a prime example, with Dustin Hoffman's autistic character Raymond operating within an unarticulated philosophy based on protecting those you love and rejecting materialist distractions that facilitate his brother Charlie's growth and development as a more admirable person.

Learning disability is cloaked, consequently, not in a physical or formal beauty but a philosophical beauty, frequently built on simple, humanist tenets. I use the word cloaked to hint that I remain suspicious of the seductive power of beauty. The characterisation of learning disability as wise feels reasonably benign. Yet it wrongly supposes learning disability is a completely arrested state, unaltered by history, culture, society or environment. The philosophical beauty is therefore already built on false assumptions, supporting Danto's idea (cited in Wolff, 2008, p.18) that 'Beauty is not always right', without ruling out the possibility that sometimes it can be.

Evaluations of beauty shouldn't divorce it from the values it assumes (which are themselves historically, culturally, socially or environmentally situated). Equally, its own values are not independent of its context but decided, finally, through the inter-relationship between various elements of any artwork, as well as the context of its production and the context of its reception.

Barthes (2000, p.57) notes an interplay between intellect and beauty in his short essay on *The Face of Garbo*. He argues that '[h]er face was not to have any reality except that of its perfection, which was intellectual even more than formal'. The principle of beauty in this image, he concludes, is 'an Idea', determined by a checklist which is independent of the object but which the object must satisfy to be recognised as beautiful.

The Sex Pistols argue for a different relationship between beauty and intellect. Their most subtly nihilistic song *Pretty Vacant* suggests that a sense of beauty (albeit devalued) is really the absence of either intellect or wisdom. This is echoed in the musical form, as the learned methods for conventionally beautifying songs – technical skill, romantic lyricism, well-crafted or gentle melodies – are absented and replaced by a violence of volume, rhythm and language.

Jon Savage (2005, p.195) sees the Sex Pistols as advocating 'the rejection of most values' and this offers an appealing starting point for learning disabled artists, as most highly prized social values are placed beyond their reach (to beauty and intellect, we can add productivity, independence, parenthood, health, wealth and so on). It is unsurprising on one level that Heavy Load adopted the anti-aesthetics of the anti-Christians and anarchists.

Instead of a radical vacancy of intellect, however, Heavy Load is content to celebrate gossip and trivia. Just as the musical brutality of punk could potentially be seen as a helpless limitation of disability rather than aesthetic choice, complete vacancy could be read detrimentally as an involuntary symptom of learning disability. Instead, Heavy Load favours casual ponderings or opinions over anything conceptually ambiguous or seemingly important. The chorus of the song George Michael runs:

'We like George Michael, we like George Michael, cause he's gay, gay at weekends, gay in the week, gay at weekends, we like George Michael.'

This cheeky approval of sexuality is rooted in liberal values but also a celebration of stable and uncontested identities, and it is tempting within the intellectual context of this paper to see this as a deliberate rejection of postcritical uncertainties. From the band's perspective, however, they are more likely to be saying just that they like George Michael, or, as elsewhere, wondering whether Bruce Forsyth is dead (Heavy Load, 2008a). Such concerns, lifted straight from everyday conversations, place the learning disabled and non-disabled band members within immediate historical or localized situations, potentially acting as a parody of the flawed universal wisdom of *Rain Man* and similar representations.

At the same time, Heavy Load's agenda is far less confrontational or anarchic than that of the Sex Pistols'. In the Heavy Load documentary, sweetly subtitled 'A Film

About Happiness', (*Heavy Load*, 2008b) the band are open about their desire to win public approval and acceptance, leading ultimately to a process of affirming, rather than rejecting, values. The emphasis on conversational observation and celebration of certainty is itself endearing and comforting in an anxious, uncertain climate.

While the focus on non-intellectual simplicity has its own charm, it is informed and reflected by the Punk form which has also moved away from opposition to acceptance. The Sex Pistols' original claim to beauty as vacancy could not be realised, partly because vacancy was paradoxically an intellectual idea that destroyed itself, and partly because the formal rupture at the time was too violent. The raw energy of punk, recreated later by imitators such as Heavy Load outside of the immediate context that provoked and received it, however, has much more potential for beauty, whether by virtue of nostalgia, recognition, assimilation or accomplishment.

In saying this, I deviate from Professor Wolff's distinction between pleasure and beauty (Wolff, 2008, p.13). While I agree that we can view beauty without pleasure (the intellectual face of Garbo being a prime illustration) once an artwork causes pleasure doesn't it acquire an experiential sense of beauty? Barthes also notes that Garbo's face contains a voluntary trace of humanity that makes it impossible to perfect the intellectual Idea. This begins a 'passage from awe to charm' that finally arrives at the face of Audrey Hepburn, which he classifies as 'an Event' (Barthes, 2000, p.57). Beauty is now individualized, originating in the object, and emerging from the coincidence of different elements. It is only noticeable once it is witnessed.

Notions and constructions of beauty may, then, be varied and transitory, but they are also inevitable, impossible to disregard yet resistant to predetermination. Equally, beauty should not be singled out for privileged attention but only understood in the interplay of meanings or values constructed in its wider context. Applied theatre seems a fruitful place to watch for changes or innovations, as the needs and experiences of marginalised communities provoke aesthetic responses – including but not limited to beauty – that are liberated from canonical criteria. As such, they arrive as an Event, instead of chasing an Idea.

Barthes, R. (2000) *Mythologies* London: Vintage Books

Heavy Load (2008a) *Shut It* Heavy Load

Heavy Load (2008b) Directed by Jerry Rothwell. UK, APT Films [Video: DVD]

Morris, J. (1991) 'A feminist perspective' in Pointon, A. ed. (1997) *Framed:*

Interrogating Disability in the Media London: British Film Institute

Rain Man (1989) Directed by Barry Levinson. USA, MGM Entertainment [Video: DVD]

Savage, J. (2005) *England's dreaming: Sex Pistols and punk rock* London: Faber

Sex Pistols (1996) *Never Mind the Bollocks/Spunk* Virgin Records Ltd

Wolff, J. (2008) *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty* Columbia: Columbia University Press