

Confessional Performance; Postmodern Culture in Recent American Theatre

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Introduction

An increasingly influential trend in recent American theatre has as its main appeal the confessional or self-revelatory monologue. Unified by confessional performance as its central response to 1980s American postmodern culture, this diverse body of works includes solo performance artists who work chiefly from autobiographical material, other solo performers who create a gallery of comic-confessional portraits, and more traditional playwrights who structure their plays almost exclusively around confessional narratives.

Two theatre-historical sources are readily apparent: the highly confessional (often autobiographical) traditions of American realism from late O'Neill to early Albee and the deconstructive autobiographical confession of Feminist performance art of the 1970s. Exploration of these two sources informs an historical perspective on structural and thematic materials of recent confessional performance in American theatre, but the main context for this trend is found in their convergence during the period we now impatiently dismiss as "the 1980s." It is in the peculiar climate of the 1980s that confessional performance registers a unique fidelity to the newly emergent, often bewildering discourse of American postmodernity.

The chief interest of this essay is in locating the phenomenon of confessional performance in this climate of American postmodernity, particularly as the unity of this trend in the 1980s suggests key aspects of a postmodern aesthetic as well as particular issues of the postmodern condition to which American theatre now responds and contributes. This recent trend in confessional performance, particularly solo works, primarily suggests a cultural condition in which identity or self-definition has become a problem of *performance*, not the initial master-narrative or "text" behind it. Confession in the 1980s, as deployed by solo performers and more traditional dramatists, subverts any stable notion of

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identity in order to disrupt or deconstruct the dominant mythology of American individualism.

After a brief examination of characteristics and sources of confessional performance as they indicate a unifiable trend, this essay's main concern is engaged through an exploration of the ways in which confessional performance both reflects and reflects on the 1980s in America as the formative period of American postmodernism.

Confessional Performance - Characteristics and Sources

Confessional performance of the 1980s falls into three fairly regular categories. Perhaps the most accessible is "monologue-drama," in which one character's extended and usually ironically reflexive confession disrupts thematic certainty as it narrates the action. Monologue-drama is significantly dominated by confession, not as the strategic framing device typical of traditional realism, but as the central action and thematic conflict of the play. Confession in monologue-drama of the 1980s poses identity as a question of ambiguous construction or outright artifice. Confession, in other words, becomes an act of survival rather than recovery, of fashioning a self immune to present reality rather than tracing a "true self" in a coherent past. Examples of such drama include the plays of Ntozake Shange, Emily Mann's *Still Life*, Christopher Durang's *Laughing Wild*, Henry David Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, and more recently Keith Curran's *Walking the Dead* and John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation*.

A second type of confessional performance, providing a kind of bridge between different genres and venues of the 1980s, is "transformational comedy:"¹ solo performance of multiple characters, in which the virtuoso and usually comic actor flips through a high-contrast field of "channels," demonstrating the potential for multiple "not-self" experience. Transformational comedy has found widespread popular appeal perhaps because of its origins in stand-up comedy and its fidelity to popular codes of social identification or projection. Examples of this type include Whoopi Goldberg's *Spook Show* (later on Broadway and video as *Whoopi - Live*), Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner's *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Eric Bogosian's *Drinking in America, Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll*, John Leguizamo's *Mambo Mouth* and *Spic-o-Rama*, and most recently Anna Deveare Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*.²

Finally, a third type of confessional performance in the 1980s served as the trend's controversial vanguard: autobiographical performance art, in which the performer uses often intimately autobiographical text, chance improvisation and ritual to deconstruct or at least deflect traditional notions of identity and social

reality. This type emphasizes almost exclusively the actual un-mediated event in an inversion of traditional illusionist principles of the theatre. Following Brecht, autobiographical performance art breaks theatrical illusion in order to encourage independent thought in its audience. But unlike Brechtian theatre, such works disrupt even the illusion of the "real" event by problematizing the identity of the performing self. These autobiographical confessions communicate neither a unifying sense of social order nor mythological meaning but rather seem to intend to enervate the universal towards celebrating difference and the ambiguity of postmodern experience. Examples of this last type include the works of Rachel Rosenthal, Spalding Gray, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and Josh Kornbluth, to name only a few.

All three types of confessional performance routinely confuse normal routes of identification, problematizing the very idea of "identity." It is instructive to remember that the word "identity" at root means 'sameness' and particularly 'repetition.' What we now take to mean something like the Romantic "true self" originally was used to departmentalize human types; it was a word for recognizing social functions in the repeated behaviour and rational consistency of the individual. By the late-20th century, the word and the notion of identity is so loaded with psychological and sociological connotations that it becomes an uncontainable dispersion of self, the crisis point at which standard definitions of self will not hold. It is this crisis of identity, as an exhausted problem, which forms the common focal point of confessional performance in the 1980s.

Combining dramatic confession and solo theatricality, confessional performance of the 1980s purposely confuses conventional distinctions between dramatic fiction and theatrical event, between character and actor, but especially between "true self" and identity. The performer either transforms through confessions of multiple characters or confesses through a manipulation of autobiographical personae. In so doing, the traditional focus in American theatre on the isolated individual is simultaneously exaggerated and subverted. In typically postmodern fashion, confessional performances are highly self-reflexive: confessing form as content. They are as much about the act and reception of performance as they are about contemporary issues or autobiographical revelation. They are about surviving identification.

It is necessary at this point to briefly survey two main historical traditions or sources which converge in confessional performance of the 1980s: the highly confessional tradition in American realism from O'Neill to Shepard and the evolution of American performance art, particularly as it embraces a deconstructive agenda in feminist works of the 1970s. What follows is by no means a full account of either source, but rather an outline of characteristic

structural and thematic materials which inform key aims of recent confessional performance as it confronts the American mythology of individualism.

Traditional American drama since O'Neill has primarily relied on the confessional monologue as a mainspring of its narrative structure. It typically functions as the climactic revelation of truth which unravels or defines the dramatic action. In the works of such "classic" American playwrights as O'Neill, Williams, Miller, Albee and Shepard, the confessional monologue falls into four categories or types: confessions of crime, regret, reverie and rage. There seem to be three main impulses or modes of intent which inform these confessional monologues: the solipsistic or protective recovery of a past self, the didactic "social thesis" delivered in negative example or heroic "admission" of truth, and the autobiographical exploration of both authorial "self" and "message." Even a casual survey of confessional monologues in traditional American drama since O'Neill will quickly reveal, as well, three themes recurrent throughout traditional American drama: social isolation, destructive family relationships, and addictions or other forms of slavery to self. All of these characteristics and categories survive in confessional performance of the 1980s, but without the largely optimistic mythology of American individualism to support the act of confession as liberation.

Following the success of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, American dramatists of the 1960s produced a spate of one-act plays heavily if not exclusively reliant on a protracted confessional monologue. Such monologues often follow much the same themes and impulses of confessional monologues in earlier traditional American drama, but they ultimately express not the definition of self but the dissolution of self. Sam Shepard's explosive monologues of the late 1960s and through the 1970s further explored the dissolution or fragmentation of self by introducing imagery of pop-culture celebrity, ritual revenge, and shamanistic vision. Cloaked autobiography and the protective recovery of a past self typical of earlier traditional American drama are metaphorically treated in Shepard's confessional monologues, significantly, in the imagery of the performing self or self as conscious performer. The confessional monologues of Shepard's drama share a common impulse with confessions in contemporaneous performance art of the late 1970s, an impulse which generates a kind of postmodern frequency in American theatre of the 1980s.

Performance art in America gained early attention in the 1960s as a radical redefinition of potential material and content in sculpture. Site "installations" and "living" sculpture soon became the venue for "happenings," ritualized events using objects and moving bodies to create new contexts for social awareness. At the same time, "happenings" questioned the departmentalization of the arts, so that by the early 1970s, performance art embraced disparate disciplines, mixing

minimalist dance, landscape or "conceptual art," political protest, mass media and spontaneous arrangements of music, painting, and verse. Most often, performance art has been the work of single artists conscious of their modernist heroism, their alienated and combative attitude towards socially normative definitions. This is particularly true of feminist or feminist-inspired performance art of the 1970s, a key source of postmodern confessional performance.

Feminist performance art of the 1970s initiated the act of self-revelation as theatricalized protest, directing the tradition of the confessional toward overt survivalism. Jeanie Forte suggests that where drama placed the individual in conflict with society (social conformity), early performance art "cast into relief the problematic relationship between life and art, between a Renaissance conception of self and a postmodern subject constructed by cultural practices."³ In so doing, performance art defined the postmodern problematization of identity latent in Shepard's drama and manifest in the theatrical material of monologue-drama and solo performance during the 1980s.

Forte suggests that the main axis between feminist performance art and postmodernism is the strategy of deconstructive criticism. The conventional dichotomies of object/image, self and not-self are drained of their power to oppress by the militant present-tense performance of self: "manifesting the metaphor most central to feminism, that 'the personal is political,' these performers have used the condition of their own lives to deconstruct the system they find oppressive."⁴ The woman's self-identification insists on her status as subject, disavowing her conventional role as object and thus the traditional confession of dominant male authorship is appropriated by the woman performer as a political tool of subversive power.

The main influence of feminist performance art of the 1970s on recent confessional performance is in its approach to the problematical relationship between public self-disclosure and private self-definition. Whatever autobiographical tension exists in traditional dramatic confessions is always submerged in the conventions of theatrical distance and objectification. But in early feminist performance art the full exploitation of autobiographical confession simultaneously worked to "deconstruct" the conventions of theatre as it theatricalized experience. In the revolutionary act of confronting her audience with the facts of her own experience and an emphatic assertion of her actual body, the feminist performance artist demanded "an alternative viewing practice."⁵ This new practice was an attempt to thwart the tacit voyeurism of bourgeois theatrical traditions, in which the American mythology of individualism found its most conservative and marketable expression.

By the 1980s, the convergence of these two sources, the tradition in narrative/autobiographical confession in American dramatic realism and the

deconstructive impulse of early Feminist performance art, inspired a diverse yet unifiable trend in American theatre which could simultaneously embrace and critically subvert an emergent popular fascination with the act of confession. American theatre, by the 1980s, was ready to entertain a newly theatricalized or narcissistic America.

America in the 1980s — The Postmodern Condition

In order to understand how confessional performance of the 1980s inherited and transformed key aspects of the confessional monologue from traditional American drama and the deconstructive intent of feminist confessional performance art, it is useful to survey the popular conditions of postmodern culture in which the theatrical confession took on new functions and significance. What follows is an attempt to describe the 1980s in America as it engaged the confessional on a variety of popular or mass-reception levels.

By the mid-1970s, the traditional confession in modern American drama had come to reflect (and reflect on) the emergence of a new cultural conception of the alienated individual as performing self. At the same time *A Chorus Line* began its enormously popular run on Broadway, American culture was investing in psycho-drama and drama-therapy, which inspired popular jargon and discussion of "role-playing," and by extension: "dressing for success," even "winning by intimidation." This trend broadened and deepened in the 1980s with the advent of such pop-psychology and "new age" interests as personal "totems," and "life pattern" role-playing analysis made popular in books like Gail Sheehy's *Passages*, James Hilman's *Puer Auternus*, and Robert Bly's *Iron John*. While popular psychology focussed on what came to be known as "adult development" in America's 1980s, youth culture practiced its own self-performances in the phenomena of "video-clones," youth who dressed and spoke as their favorite "stars" on MTV. "Vogueing," or high-fashion posturing and detailed role-playing usually in a reversal of gender, offered a competitive arena for expert *seeming*, what one participant in the documentary *Paris is Burning* explains as the chief competition to seem "realer than real."⁴ Such self-conscious attention to mimicry of popular media-personalities and the creation of alternative personae suggests an interesting transformation of American individualism: celebrity no longer is the mysterious achievement or worship of fame but the domain of self-actualization. The 1980s audience recognized its participation in creating celebrity, and went one step further: it ironically simulated what it earnestly helped to create.

On this pivotal interest in multiple selves, fluid and ironic identification, the postmodern turns. Postmodernism is the awareness of, and is perhaps defined by,

ubiquitous performance. As early as 1977, a literary critic announced: "Performance, the unifying mode of the postmodern, is now what matters."⁵ By the early 1980s, this could be said of far more than literature. American culture seemed to discover a theatrical taste for the play of surfaces, the power to transgress, and the performative hyper-present tense in a decade that has not yet lost its peculiar influence on American theatre.

In 1979, Christopher Lasch wrote *The Culture of Narcissism*, subtitled "American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations." Although it can be read as an artifact of the 1970s' "me generation," Lasch's thesis and analyses are more broadly based on the emergence of what he calls "psychological man . . . the final product of bourgeois individualism."⁸ The phenomena Lasch critically explores in the "culture of narcissism" are not limited to the 1970s. In fact, much of what Lasch discovers as submerged in 1970s cultural consciousness is overt and aggressive in American life during the 1980s.

Lasch's main thesis is that the economic stagnation, military and political humiliation of the decades following 1965, as well as the myriad fractures in social consensus of this period, engendered a cultural tendency to reject the past and any claims to universal or common ideas. The Romantic American of expansion and dominance, the "economic man," was replaced by the "psychological man" of ironic detachment, anxiety and narcissistic survival. Americans in the 1980s had much to survive.

Ronald Reagan's advance to power may have been in part due to a popular desire for reaffirming the status of the expansive, economic man. But for all the Reagan-campaign nostalgia of "morning in America" and "standing tall", the initiatives of America's social agenda of prior decades one by one dissolved. Unions were delivered a decisive blow in 1981 when Reagan broke the Air Traffic Controller's strike. In 1982, the Equal Rights Amendment was defeated and unemployment reached levels topped only by those of the Great Depression of the 1930s. By 1983, government avoidance of treating the AIDS epidemic was already apparent, recognizably a result of indifference to "marginal" members of society. By 1985, family farms across America were being foreclosed by the government and a rising number of "homeless"—addicts of drugs and alcohol, the disenfranchised mentally ill, the unemployed and undereducated, women and children choosing the streets for fear of abuse at home—appeared on American streets in towns as well as larger cities.⁶

Scandals in government, religion and sports rocked the national confidence in traditional celebrity-heroes. In 1986, the space shuttle called "Challenger" exploded, and with it American faith in its last heroic image as pioneer. In 1987, with still no cure for AIDS in sight, the scientific community delivered more bad news: the depletion of the ozone, for which American toxic emissions are

responsible by something like 30%, threatens to radically alter world weather patterns, ocean levels, and land environments conducive to human survival. Throughout the 1980s, a media-hyped "war on drugs" failed to reduce or even fairly report the class-less, race-blind, widespread addictions that continue to destroy countless American lives and communities. The American dream in the 1980s was assailed by domestic realities even Reagan's optimistic rhetoric could not obscure. George Will, one of Reagan's chief apologists, wrote in a special essay for *Newsweek* in 1989 that Reagan's optimism had been "a narcotic that numbed the nation's senses to the hazards over the horizon."⁷ But Americans had other ways of numbing themselves to the troubles of the Reagan era.

Following Lasch's analyses, it is fair to suggest that even more for the "greed generation" than was true for the "me generation," the cultivation of self at virtually pathological levels of intolerance, fear, and denial, was one means of individual survival. Typically of American culture and the postmodern, this survival mentality was instantly and expertly reinforced by consumer exploitation. Advertisements on TV and radio told us: "You, you're the one;" "It's not just your car, it's your freedom;" "You only go around once, so go for the gusto!" and "Just do it." The big questions of the decade were: "Are we having fun yet?" and "How do *you* spell relief?" Even Reagan's army promised the American Narcissus to "be all that you can be."

Health clubs, fashion manuals and magazines, the emergence of new age "peak performance" studies and the entrenchment of "self help" sections in American bookstores signaled the 1980s' first line of self-defense. A proliferation of "healing" programs modeled after the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous helped millions of Americans identify themselves with an ever-widening range of addictive behaviours. A new breed of therapy from career counselors to aroma-therapists, from past-life guides to color analysts, from vision treks to channeling, offered the American Narcissus an even wider variety of strategies in survival through "inner healing."

Two pop icons of the 1980s incarnated such attention to self-cultivation and anxiety, Madonna and Michael Jackson. Madonna's career rose on the calculated manipulation of a fully mediatized persona made of perhaps one part nostalgia to two parts playful sleaze. Jackson's reclusive, eccentric "self" was placed in titillating juxtaposition with mass-audience superstar appearances. While it was the actor-president Reagan's ultimate disgrace that he never fully confessed to his public, both Madonna and Michael Jackson performed widely marketed (and hugely lucrative) confessions, ever sensitive to the needs of their audience, their creators.

The 1980s in many ways institutionalized the trends that Lasch saw emerging from the 1970s, particularly the self-searching crisis of identity and its

attendant commercial exploitation. In 1984, Lasch wrote a sequel or addendum to *The Culture of Narcissism*, titled *The Minimal Self*, in which he reaffirms his earlier thesis and defines the conditions of "seige mentality" and "psychic survival" as they became more acutely evident in the Narcissus of the 1980s:

As the Greek legend reminds us, it is the confusion of self and the not-self -not "egoism"- that distinguishes the plight of Narcissus. The minimal or narcissistic self is, above all, a self uncertain of its own outlines, longing either to remake the world in its own image or to merge into its environment in blissful union. The current concern with "identity" registers some of this difficulty in defining the boundaries of selfhood. So does the minimalist style in contemporary art and literature, which derives much of its subject matter from popular culture, in particular from the invasion of experience by images, and thus helps us to see that minimal selfhood is not just a defensive response to danger but arises out of a more fundamental social transformation: the replacement of a reliable world of durable objects by a world of flickering images that make it harder and harder to distinguish reality from fantasy.⁸

This passage was quoted at some length because it helps to argue against the derogative "egotism" that many presume Lasch meant by Narcissism and because in its more precise definitions it engages several key aspects important to understanding the relationship between confessional performance of the 1980s and the postmodern condition.

Most significant to the emergence of confessional performance during the 1980s was this blurred distinction between reality and fantasy that Lasch describes, between "the self and the not-self." The survival strategy of what Lasch calls "the minimal self" indicates a crucial nexus between postmodernism and recent confessional performance. The essential act of theatre, mimetic representation, or the inhabitation of an "other," is the very condition of surviving everyday experience in postmodernity. Postmodern performance, like the minimal self, contracts its scope to engage the object as image, the individual experience as theatre. And its chief mode of mediating our need for survival in "a world of flickering images" is the confession.

Confessional Performance and the Postmodern

Confessional performance of the 1980s exploits and subverts two important and symbiotic aspects of American theatrical taste: a fascination with celebrity

and consumerist delight in vicarious experience, both of which figure centrally to "the culture of narcissism" and the postmodern. Objectification of the performing individual, the mainspring of American celebrity, is undermined in confessional performance by the absence or complete falsification of dialogue and the often intimate detail of body imagery which denies conventional comforts of "aesthetic distance." Consumerist indulgence in acquiring and accumulating vicarious experience, or the "bought effort of inert customers" (to paraphrase Roland Barthes),⁹ is particularly intensified and ironically exploited by the autobiographical nature of confessional performance, which often openly confronts a live audience with its desire for passive, commodified experience.

It is significant that these two aspects of mainstream theatrical taste (and practice) in America came to notable, "postmodern" extremes in the 1980s through the mediatized act of celebrity confession, from televised interviews before a live audience with Donahue or Oprah to the boom in scandal-soaked autobiographies by the rich and famous. This often crass commodification of self proposed the narcissistic strategy of remaking the world in one's own image at the same time that it underscored the problem of identity. Confessional performance of the 1980s consciously made use of such cultural material in order to disrupt the American mythology from which confession was originally deployed.

Henry David Hwang's *M. Butterfly* is governed by an ironic parody of sensationalistic "tell-all" tabloid confession from a character who believes himself to be a kind of celebrity. As Hwang's erstwhile protagonist Gallimard confesses, however, it becomes clear that there is a fatal tension building between the self he cynically constructs for audience consumption and the dislocated interior void of identity. Hwang's rather baroque construction can be read as subversively critical of a trend in the 1980s, evident in celebrity politics and scandal, in which truth is reduced to one's private conviction and a lie becomes merely one's fantasy performed in public. Under such conditions, any traditional onus of guilt or responsibility, the modern locus of motive, is dispersed or removed. (Admiral Poindexter's marvelous phrase "plausible deniability" comes to mind.) The old tool for wresting power, confession, becomes a new tool for obfuscating the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

Confessional performance in American live theatre emerges at the same time a highly popular trend in American television exploits celebrity confession. In the 1980s, every major network engaged a "talk-show" format that involved the innovative presence of a live audience which could question the celebrity or social novelty of the hour. On the pretext of a traditional "interview," Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, Geraldo Rivera, Sally Jessy Raphael and numerous others, hosted shows in which the main interest was not so much a journalistic

examination or gathering of information but the ignition of dramatic conflicts of difference between "guest" and spectator. Likewise, contemporary confessional performance manipulated the act of confession to enervate the universal or celebrate difference.

Christopher Durang's characters in *Laughing Wild* finally must interact in a shared fantasy of talk-show confession, their own confessional monologues delivered to the "real audience" in the first half of the play having failed to secure any stable sense of identity. Eric Bogosian's explosive portraits of the American male in performative crisis confront mainstream audience reception of the erotics of male power. Bogosian's characters are all either trying to sell themselves or their experience, deluded by addiction or power fantasies, un-mediated by a talk-show host, unwilling to seek any universal sympathy in their audience. In sharp contrast, Whoopi Goldberg's characters, all of whom make direct and important reference to television and self-performance, promote a world in which difference, the fact of contemporary isolation and identity crisis, can be celebrated through confession.

Philip Auslander argues that performance art of the 1980s not only employed particular tools of mass media but embraced the structural formats of "flow culture" conditioned by television, tabloids, radio and movies. He identifies a key aspect of American mass culture of the 1980s and of postmodern performance as a paradox of performer-audience relationships in mass "communication:"

Like Sartre's mass-media audience, whose collectivity is defined by the very agency which guarantees the failure of the collective the audience of postmodern art is engaged in a collective experience which converts even the experience of collectivity itself into an experience of isolating internality.¹⁰

Karen Finley's "black sheep folk" from *We Keep Our Victims Ready* are identified not in terms of communality but in terms of shared isolation, alienation, rage and despair. Rachel Rosenthal's multiple personae celebrate difference to such a degree that she implicates her audience not in common experience but in fragmented potentiality. Spalding Gray's neurotic persona comes close to schizophrenic dissolution in performance as his audience is swept up in the flow of his multiple perspectives or "reportage" of self.

Confessional performance places extreme emphasis on the tension between performance "reality" and confessional "fiction" in order to break down traditional communication-relationships in the theatre. Usually, this emphasis is meant to underscore the personal as political equation. Umberto Eco in his article

"Semiotics of Theatrical Performance" suggests that in traditional theatre "the actor is both real and artificial sign. The context is where rhetoric and ideology come in."¹¹ Confessional performance of the 1980s emphasizes this context to such a degree that the art becomes almost pure rhetoric for ideological objectives. But the difference between this practice and the speech-making of politicians is in the performer's ambiguous relationship to his or her ideology. In recent confessional performance, the autobiographical always implies if it does not explicitly define the performer's own complicit position within the culture he or she hopes to critically engage.

Phillip Auslander argues that "postmodern art does not position itself outside the practices it holds up for scrutiny. It *problematizes* but does not *reject*, the representational means it shares with other cultural practices."¹² Postmodern theatre does this by emphasizing the field of perception over the will of creation. This aspect of the postmodern aesthetic most defines the manner and matter of confessional performance, as it consistently subverts narrative authority by replacing objective assumptions with subjective disclaimers or structure with process. Just as the minimal self may deploy such strategies for survival in "a world of flickering images," the confessional performer deploys them as images of survival. It may seem strange to argue that a theatrical form at least as potentially solipsistic as confessional performance would emphasize the field of reception over the will of creation, but this is precisely the paradox of Narcissus and possibly the key to Postmodernism.

Confessional performance finds affinity with its contemporary culture of narcissism and the postmodern in imitating the spectator who projects him or herself in life as performer. The event of Spalding Gray talking to his audience includes a sense that he is describing his own experience as audience to himself. Gray reports his reception of performance and then concludes with his worries about his theatre audience's reception: "I'm not making up any of these stories, I'm really not" (Gray 24). When Lily Tomlin performs "Lily Tomlin" worrying about her performance she includes in this her spectators' worry about life seeming like performance. Her identification with her audience's sense of performance in life is clear throughout *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, but especially in its conclusion, when Trudy reports that the extra-terrestrials found in their experience of theatre "the play was soup . . . the audience . . . art" (Wagner 212). In postmodern fashion, the world is not so much the stage and its players but the house and its spectators.

Confessional performance of the 1980s includes all of the chief strategies deployed by postmodernists in other disciplines: "pastiche" or intertextual double-coding, ironic detachment through self-reflexive reportage or appropriation of forms, and the coy deployment of ambiguity through a variety of devices

including authorial disclaimers, imagery of gender reversal or androgyny, and Auslander's "flow" structure which promises no structure. These all seem to be aspects of the same impulse: to disrupt dominant cultural mythologies and defy critical explanation. To use a Russian Formalist word, the postmodern "defamiliarizes" by manipulating cultural standards and traditional forms within the context of contemporary relativity. Jean-Francois Lyotard defines the postmodern aesthetic as "that which refuses the consolation of good forms, of a consensus of *taste*, which would permit the nostalgia of the impossible to be felt in common."¹³ Confessional performance of the 1980s particularly refused such consensus by exploring ways in which the American mythology of individualism creates and sustains a common nostalgia for the impossible.

Coda: Postmodernism Defined?

The term postmodern gained its characteristically unstable and perhaps inflated currency in American popular culture during the 1980s. It had achieved academic definition in art and architecture and had received attention by a few adventurous literary critics before 1980,¹⁴ but its appearance in the broader context of American popular discourse is as new as it is problematical. In 1988, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that postmodern had become a "term of endearment," applicable to haute couture, cinema, television, rock music, advertising, cuisine, and even a new definition of self as promoted by *Vogue Magazine*.¹⁵ This article explicitly engaged three important ways in which the postmodern avant-garde had come to influence broader social phenomena in American culture of the 1980s: the primacy of image, aesthetics of consumerism, and strategies of ambiguity. But the article's main agenda in ironically diminishing a piece of intellectual jargon to the status of "term of endearment," in 1988, was to announce the end of an era, and thus participate in a fourth characteristic of the postmodern: the exhaustion of history. To use the term "postmodern" is to participate in fashioning history as something like a fictional trope, a play of surfaces and mythologies which are made extinct by the act of naming them.

Marshall Blonksy, in *American Mythologies*, reports in his (obligatory for the postmodern) confessional preface, that his semiotician's odyssey through postmodern America was chiefly launched out of curiosity for witnessing, "the handlers of culture *periodizing*: causing the national conscience to refuse itself, to break up from itself." The value of such periodizing is most apparent in fashion, where the primacy of image conditioned by aesthetics of consumerism must routinely affirm a fact of postmodern experience: "The newly discovered abnormality of yesterday props up the normality of the present."¹⁶ But

"periodizing" also seems peculiarly theatrical as Blonsky describes it, in its concern for mimetic separation and review. Indeed, much of what has been written about postmodernism, from economic philosophy to architectural history, seems to agree in terms theatrical.

In his essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Frederic Jameson concludes that the postmodern is primarily conditioned by a "transformation of reality into images" and "the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents."¹⁷ Likewise, Charles Jencks' notion of "double-coding" and Ihab Hassan's "literature of silence" refer to a multiplicity of images which do not operate as symbols of anything. The play of surfaces, or "succession of intensities"¹⁸ is the substance, not the form of the postmodern. Add to this Philip Auslander's consideration of "flow," in which "the interposition of 'real' and 'fictional' images" typical of television and movies becomes a definition of postmodern culture: "a culture in which any particular cultural manifestation is part of an extended and disorienting 'montagist social text'"¹⁹ and one begins to discover how the postmodern seems to express and participate in a deeper and fundamentally theatrical transformation of cultural paradigms. Artifice is truth; the familiar sign signifies itself. Postmodern culture revives the ontological status of the icon. (In the 1980s, the United States was governed by one.) And perhaps the best way to question or challenge such icon-formation is through the subject act of confession.

The chief reason there is so much apparent resonance between confessional performance, the cultural observations of Christopher Lasch and theoretical approaches to the problem of defining the postmodern condition is that the postmodern self is a performing self and the postmodern aesthetic is essentially theatrical. Herbert Blau, in *The Audience* argues that the public sphere is no longer distinguishable from the private because theatricality informs our era:

Entranced by image, we are emptied into theater. . . . With an autonomy of its own, performance spreads by deconstruction not only from theater to other disciplines but across the binaries of art and life.²⁰

One reason that confessional performance emerged in America's 1980s as a trend capable of crossing into popular taste or spheres of marketability may be that Americans are increasingly aware of their own participation in events or experience once relegated to the moral hyperbole and conscious masking of the stage but now disseminated in instant news reports and dissected by self-help experts.

The idea that postmodern culture is in some way engaged in experiencing life as theatre is reinforced by what Karl Toepfer suggests about postmodern performance:

The postmodern aesthetic is fundamentally theatrical in the sense that the appropriation of forms means that one form masks, disguises, hides itself within or behind another form. . . . And of course this ambiguation of difference between forms has the larger and even more uncertain consequence of blurring distinctions between political and theatrical action, art and commerce, past and present, theory and practice, beauty and "normality."²¹

Contemporary American television produces re-enactments of emergency and mystery, using the rhetorical style of news documentary while casting the original participants in dramatized revisions of their own past. Mark Kostabi engages the New York art scene with an industrialist's eye for supply-side dealing. By 1985, Kostabi was hiring other artists to produce paintings which he then signed as his own and sold for the higher price "his" art could command. And more recently we may watch the Reagan years dissolving into the Clinton years as a theatrical transition from western melodrama to talk-show.

Not only did Andy Warhol's flippant prophecy of minimal fame for every individual seem more and more a reality in the 1980s, the very flow of images in which our imagination if not our experience seemed inextricably caught may have conditioned us to define ourselves in terms of image and flow. What was once latent became manifest in the desire to hear confessions and to confess. The truth-telling urge central to dramatic action and theatrical presentment has become a cultural metaphor, the image of image, a vision of visions.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Terra Daugirda Pressler's doctoral dissertation *Transformative Comedy: An Emerging Genre* for the phrase "transformational comedy." Pressler's focus is more specifically on thematic and cultural effects of recent comedy, while my modification of her phrase is intended mainly to point up the theatrical structure of solo multiple characterizations and such performance's origins in stand-up comedy.

2. Anna Deveare Smith's recent works offer an interesting 1990s hybrid of "transformational comedy" structure and documentary confession reminiscent of Emily Mann's *Still Life* and *Execution of Justice*. I include Smith's works here also to acknowledge that my three categories for 1980s confessional performance are not perfectly stable and do not presume the constitution of a genre.

3. This and the following two quotations on the same page are from Jeanie Fore's richly instructive article titled: "Women's Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism" for *Theatre Journal* (40.2 1988) 217-235.

4. *Paris is Burning*, produced and directed by Jennie Livingston through Off White Productions Incorporated and distributed on video through Academy Entertainment, offers a fascinating gloss on almost any text or discussion concerned with postmodern theory and experience.

5. Michel Benamou, *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison: Coda, 1977) 3.

6. My sources for the facts identified in this and the following paragraph are *The Encyclopedia of American Facts and Dates* edited by Gorton Carruth (New York: Harper, 1987) 798, 811, 829, and Robert E. Denton's *The Primetime Presidency of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Praeger, 1988) 64.

7. Bob Schieffer and Gary Paul Gates, *The Acting President* (New York: Dutton, 1989) 378.

8. Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self* (New York: Norton, 1984) 19.

9. I paraphrase from Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, 1972), in particular from his essays titled "The Blue Guide" and "Striptease."

10. Philip Auslander, "Going with the Flow—Performance Art and Mass Culture," *The Drama Review* (33.2 1989) 132.

11. Umberto Eco, "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance," *The Drama Review* (21.1 1980) 117.

12. Philip Auslander, "Going with the Flow—Performance Art and Mass Culture" 132.

13. Stanley Fogel, *The Postmodern University* (Ontario: ECW, 1988) 21.

14. See especially: Charles Jencks' *What is Postmodernism?*, Ihab Hassan's *Paracriticisms*, Michel Benamou's *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, and Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*.

15. Nikki Finke, "Post-Modern Becomes Term of Endearment," *The Los Angeles Times* (12 September 1988) V-1.

16. Marshall Blonsky, *American Mythologies* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992) xxiii, xxiv.

17. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic—Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay, 1983) 125.

18. Michel Benamou, *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Madison: Coda, 1977) 6.

19. Philip Auslander, "Going with the Flow—Performance Art and Mass Culture" 125.

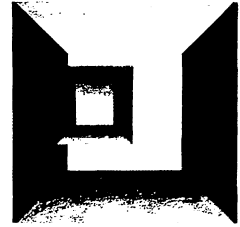
20. Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 2.

21. Karl Toepfer, "Strategies in Postmodern Aesthetic Performance," *Theatre Three* (6.2 1989)

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