

Introduction

Wow!

Consider the singular beauty of the word “wow.” Think about the pleasure in forming that perfectly symmetrical phrase on your tongue. Imagine the particular enthusiasm it expresses—the sense of wonderment, astonishment, absolute engagement. A “wow” is something that has to be earned, and in the modern age we distribute standing ovations far too often when we are just being polite, but we have become too jaded to give a wow. The term takes on a certain irony, as if it can only be uttered in quotation marks. Perhaps we are not as jaded as the *Variety* critic who was asked to review a performance by a pair of Siamese twins who did impersonations, sang, did ballroom and tap dancing, and juggled, all in the course of a ten-minute vaudeville act. All the critic could muster was, “Not bad for an act of this kind,” a phrase that falls far short of a wow.

There’s a wow-worthy sequence near the beginning of Zhang Yimou’s 2004 film *House of Flying Daggers*. A blind courtesan has been brought before a local magistrate who suspects that she may be a member of the secret Flying Daggers organization, and not a brothel entertainer. He demands a performance, challenging her to what he calls the “echo game.” She is brought to the center of a room lined with drums on poles. The crowd gathers on the balcony to watch. The magistrate flings a bean and hits one of the drums. The blind woman thwacks out her long sleeves and slaps them against the same drum. A group of musicians signal their enthusiasm for her perceptual mastery. Then, he throws a second bean and this one ricochets across several drums before dropping to the floor. Again, she flings out her long sleeves and hits the first and then the second drum, followed by grand leaps and twirls. Finally, the magistrate flings the entire bowl of beans, which rain down upon the drums. She listens carefully, waits a beat, and then goes into an elaborate dance, hitting

drum after drum, trying to map their trajectory. And then she flings out her sleeves one more time, wraps them around a sword that lies on the table, and uses it to threaten the magistrate, a gesture that leads into a spectacular martial arts sequence.

Throughout the scene, we are left seeing but not quite believing. Much of the pleasure comes from the sequence's larger-than-life qualities—with its wire-work stunts, slow-motion cinematography, and special effects. It is easy to understand why we would be impressed to see such a performance improvised live before our very eyes. It is harder to understand why it holds such wonderment for us in an age where we know every element could be faked, yet the sequence is so spectacularly executed on the screen that it becomes a showstopper. It has its own trajectory: each gesture builds on the one before; each action is just a little more spectacular than what precedes it. The scene is constructed so there is an internal audience—the people lining the balcony—whose oohs and ahs stand in for our own astonished responses toward what we are seeing. Arguably, Yimou makes an aesthetic mistake—putting this sequence so early in the film, he has to struggle to top it in subsequent scenes and never quite overcomes this war of expectations.

The scene can be extracted from the film as a set piece and watched with almost equal pleasure. At the same time, Yimou uses the sequence to set the stage for everything that follows. He returns to the “echo game” later in the film, when the magistrate himself is blindfolded and forced to try to duplicate her virtuosity. In the end, we discover that the protagonist is a woman pretending to be blind, that the magistrate and the woman are former suitors, that the performance is a kind of lovemaking, and that they are being forced to pretend that they are strangers even though they yearn to be in each other's arms. The narrative adds more and more layers to our appreciation of her virtuosity. Yimou amplifies the martial arts film tradition of playing with identity until none of the characters is what they seem and they find themselves actually feeling the emotions they have been feigning. All of this builds toward a tragic ending where these divided loyalties result in the deaths of all of the primary characters. All of this is to say that the scene works both within and outside of the narrative structure of the film.

The essays in *The Wow Climax* are about things that make me go “wow.” I am someone who cries intensely at movies, even bad movies, especially bad movies on airplanes. I am someone who laughs loudly, even at bad

jokes, especially bad jokes, and I am someone who gasps and applauds loudly when I see an acrobat do a back flip or watch someone eat fire. When I was little, my mother let me go inside the sideshow tent at a local carnival; an hour later she came inside, the manager in tow, looking for me, convinced I had been kidnapped, and instead found me sitting there, eyes open wide, watching a man drive a nail up his nose. In short, I am someone who is passionate about popular culture.

Most popular culture is shaped by a logic of emotional intensification. It is less interested in making us think than it is in making us feel. Yet that distinction is too simple: popular culture, at its best, makes us think by making us feel. We saw this in the scene from *House of Flying Daggers* described above, in which what once seemed to be a set piece turns out to be the key to understanding the film. Popular culture can generate a fair amount of effortless emotion by following well-trod formulas, but to make us go “wow,” it has to twist or transform those formulas into something marvelous and unexpected. Several recent books, most notably Steven Johnson’s *Everything Bad Is Good For You*,¹ have made the case for the complexity of contemporary popular culture and for the demands it makes on consumers. My first response to this book was to embrace the argument as consistent with my own long-standing interests in helping people better appreciate the complexity and diversity of popular culture. My second response, however, was to challenge the argument that this was anything new. Popular culture has enjoyed complexity and diversity throughout its history; it is simply that most intellectuals lack the knowledge and competency to consume it with any real appreciation. The only time we are truly brain-dead in our response to popular culture is when it becomes so formulaic that it no longer provokes an emotional reaction; and at that point, it has failed on its own terms and any other we want to apply. Whatever anyone has told you, it is certainly not the case that to see one work is to see them all. It is almost certainly the case, though, that to fully appreciate a piece of popular art, you need to have seen enough other examples to observe the ways it builds upon and breaks with existing formulas. The ability to fall back on the tried and the true frees the best popular artists to take risk with their audiences and experiment with their materials in search of the more elusive wow.

Through the years, my essays have developed a formula of their own: I almost always start by describing some element that embodies the subject’s most sensationalistic dimensions, and then I unpack that moment as

the launching pad for my cultural analysis. We often respond to these wow moments as if they defied any interpretation, as if they spoke to us purely on a visceral level. Yet, they may be some of the richest openings for cultural analysis. I start from the assumption that the emotions generated by popular culture are never personal; rather, to be popular, the text has to evoke broadly shared feelings. The most emotional moments are often the ones that hit on conflicts, anxieties, fantasies, and fears that are central to the culture.

This book's title comes from an old vaudeville term. The moment of peak spectacle and maximum emotional impact in an act became known as the "wow climax," the "wow finish," or simply the "big wow." Writing in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1925, in the declining years of the vaudeville circuits, theater critic Walter De Leon explained, "An added kick at the finish of an act . . . is an elusive little thing that every vaudevillian tries to capture for the completely comprehensible reason that its possession usually guarantees long routes and pleasant profits. It is the finish of an act which does, or does not, start an audience palm-whacking. The measure and quality of this applause reveal the degree of pleasure received from the act. The acts that afford the most pleasure to the largest number of different audiences are the acts that play most steadily and continuously."²

Vaudeville was not about telling stories; it was about putting on a show, and more than that, it was about each performer's individual attempt to stop the show and steal the applause. Vaudeville had little use for the trappings of theatrical realism; it was about the spectacular, the fantastic, and the novel. Vaudeville had little use for continuity, consistency, or unity; it was about fragmentation, transformation, and heterogeneity. The underlying logic of the variety show rested on the assumption that heterogeneous entertainment was essential to attracting and satisfying a mass audience. The vaudeville program was constructed from modular units of diverse material, each no more than twenty minutes long, juxtaposed with an eye toward the maximum amount of variety and novelty.

Performers were responsible for originating their acts, negotiating with production specialists for materials and props, rehearsing and refining their performance skills, and transporting and maintaining scenery. This performer-centered mode of production resulted in an aesthetic strongly focused on performance virtuosity. Performers were expected to execute their specialties with a consistently high level of speed and precision. Fre-

quently, acts were designed to focus attention upon the performer's skills, having little or no other interest. Those skills were measured in terms of the audience's outward emotional response: vaudeville had little use for nuance; everything was designed to ensure a big splash. In the old system, the local theater manager would stick his head into the auditorium near the end of each act and listen to hear how it went over; the manager's notes helped determine whether the performer would get further bookings. So the performer's economic livelihood depended on the ability to shape and control an audience's emotional trajectory through the performance in the hopes of hitting a crescendo at the moment that really mattered.

Not surprisingly, the vaudevillians developed their own folk theories of affect. Here's De Leon again: "The natural, at least customary, reserve of an American audience is comparable to the cement work damming a river. If the performer can open a sluice gate or spillway the tide of applause will rush out—we hope—in a strong compact stream. If through lack of fitting climax or showmanship no outlet for the pent enthusiasm is provided, it is very apt to trickle thinly over the top of the dam or swash around weakly in backwater bayous."³ De Leon's language is lush, even erotic, as he talks about the relationship that emerges between the performer and their public.⁴ He is, after all, talking about a climax, which causes the audience to lose control over their emotions, maybe even over their bodily functions. The vaudevillian wants us to laugh till we cry or turn red in the face or wet our pants or rock about convulsively or slap the person next to us on the back. The entire art of vaudeville performance was structured around achieving that basic emotional impact.

De Leon viewed vaudeville as a form of popular art, one with its own fully developed if sometimes implicit aesthetic principles. My first book, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, sought to identify the defining characteristics of the vaudeville performance tradition as a way into understanding the process by which Hollywood absorbed a generation of variety performers, created vehicles that exploited their performance skills, and pulled those performers toward the classical norms that dominated American film practice.⁵ I was interested in the tension between an aesthetic based on spectacle and one based on storytelling; between an aesthetic that built toward a climax that blew off the roof and one that built toward the resolution of narrative enigmas; between one that read performance in terms of virtuosity and one that read performance in terms of characterization. My goal was

to develop a new critical vocabulary that would allow us to appreciate these early sound comedies for what they achieved rather than judging them by standards developed in response to other cultural forms.

Of course, De Leon was not unique in recognizing the emotional dynamics shaping the popular culture. In his essay “Montage of Attractions,” Sergei Eisenstein outlines what the legitimate theater and cinema might learn from the mechanisms by which the circus thrills its spectators. Choosing a term closely associated with the fairground, Eisenstein defines an attraction as “any aggressive moment in the theater, i.e. any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influences verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole.”⁶ Eisenstein, like De Leon, goes on to catalogue different devices that can produce “shock” and “awe.” For Eisenstein, perhaps the most vivid examples of “attractions” could be found in *Grand Guignol*, “where eyes are gouged out or arms and legs amputated on stage.”⁷ Eisenstein doesn’t simply want to make us laugh; he wants to make us squirm. He saw the “living play of the passions” as the starting point for the kind of ideological transformation he wanted to achieve. Eisenstein distinguishes between “tricks,” which are designed to showcase the accomplishment of performers and are often self-contained, and “attractions,” which are designed as provocations and measured entirely in terms of audience response. His contemporary, Lev Kuleshov, showed a particular fascination with what he called “monsters”—performers who could exert extraordinary control over their bodies.⁸

The Soviet film theorists’ fascination with the mechanics of emotion needs to be understood against the backdrop of a larger Russian formalist preoccupation with the affective dimensions of popular theater. Drama critic Sergei Balukhatyi, for example, wrote a detailed “poetics of melodrama,” which, as theater historian Daniel Gerould notes, started from the premise that “all elements in melodrama—its themes, technical principles, construction and style—are subordinate to one overriding aesthetic goal: the calling forth of ‘pure,’ ‘vivid’ emotions. Plot, character, and dialogue, working in unison, serve to elicit from the spectator the greatest possible intensity of feeling.”⁹ Melodrama, Balukhatyi argues, depends on “foolproof emotional bases,” streamlined characters, a series of jolting twists of fate, simple and recognizable conflicts, and abrupt shifts of fortune, all designed to provoke an “immediate impression.” Actions in melodrama, he suggested, were justified not by ideology or nar-

rative logic but by the sheer force of the emotion that the scene was designed to express.

David Bordwell has extended Eisenstein's interest in the attraction to talk about contemporary Hong Kong action cinema, which is similarly built around expressive performance and affective intensification: "In order to attract a mass audience, popular art deals with emotions like anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and indignation. . . . Cinema is particularly good at arousing emotions kinesthetically, through actions and music. Bruce Lee asked his students to give their fighting techniques, 'emotional content', such as purposefully directed anger. When this quality is captured in vigorous, strictly patterned movement, in nicely judged framings and crackling cutting with overwhelming music and sound effects, you can find yourself tensing and twitching to the rhythms of the fight."¹⁰ Bordwell's celebration of the "kaleidoscopic variety," the "expressive amplification," and the sensuousness of the Hong Kong cinema would have sounded familiar to De Leon, Eisenstein, Balukhatyi, and their contemporaries.

The most famous application of Eisenstein's ideas about "attraction" came in Tom Gunning's influential 1986 essay "Cinema of Attractions," which emerged as a manifesto of sorts for a new approach to early cinema. Rather than seeing films made before 1906 as a series of stepping stones toward a more classically constructed narrative (a perspective that long shaped the historiography of the period), Gunning insisted that early cinema should be read according to a different aesthetic logic: "The cinema of attractions directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle—a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself. . . . Its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative."¹¹ This focus on spectacle and showmanship is consistent with the logic of the "wow climax" of the vaudeville stage and the mechanics of emotion that the Russian theorists saw as shaping stage melodrama. Gunning links the "cinema of attractions" not only to the vaudeville stage but to a larger tendency toward sensationalism and stimulation in the popular culture of the early twentieth century. Gunning's account has proven widely influential for others who want to think about the place of spectacle in popular culture, and subsequent work has spread outward to encompass writing on screen comedy, the musical, animation, and pornography, among other topics.

De Leon also would have recognized many of the techniques identified by David Freeman in a recent book, *Creating Emotion in Games*, including the appeal to scientific expertise implicit in the author's reference to proven principles of "emotioneering." The book goes on to identify thirty-two categories of emotional techniques that game designers can use to intensify the game experience. As Freeman explains, "When emotion is added to a game, then the game will appeal to wider demographics. The game gets better press, gets better buzz, and is more likely to generate allegiance to the brand. The development team will have increased passion for the project. All this translates to increased profits and a much richer game experience."¹² After all, such games began—like cinema itself—as arcade attractions; their core aesthetic principles stemmed from the need to pump up players so that they kept dropping quarters into the machine. As games moved into the home, they became known as "twitch" entertainment, a phrase that refers to the need to constantly hit buttons to keep the action flowing, but also suggests the nervous energy they generate from the player.

One would be hesitant to see the ever-so-respectable C. S. Lewis among the advocates of sensationalism in popular culture, yet his essay "On Stories" seems especially interested in mapping the qualities of emotional experience that shape our encounters with literary texts. Lewis rejects, on the one hand, the tendency to reduce the details found in good stories into metaphors or allegories, and, on the other, the tendency to reduce the reading of popular fiction to some generalizable quest for "excitement." Rather, he wants us to deal with these details as part of richly constructed worlds of the imagination, each of which generate their own distinctive forms of emotional release: "different kinds of danger strike different chords from the imagination. . . . There is a fear which is twin sister to awe, such as a man in wartime feels when he first comes within the sound of guns; there is a fear which is the twin sister of disgust, such as a man feels on finding a snake or scorpion in his bed-room. There are taunt, quivering fears (for one split second hardly distinguishable from a kind of pleasurable thrill) that a man may feel on a dangerous horse or a dangerous sea; and again, dead, squashed, flattened, numbing fears as when we think we have cancer or cholera. There are also fears which are not of danger at all: like the fear of some large and hideous, though innocuous, insect or the fear of a ghost. All this, even in real life. But, in imagination, where the fear does not rise to abject terror and is not discharged in action, the qualitative difference

is much stronger.”¹³ Good storytelling, Lewis suggests, requires a close understanding of the link between details and their emotional force, requires the teller of tales to shape the affective experience of the reader through every word.

The techniques deployed differ from medium to medium, but the vaudeville performer, the early cinematic showman, the wrestler, the action or horror film director, and the game designer are all trying to use every device their medium offers in order to maximize the emotional response of their audience. Insofar as these popular artists and performers think about their craft, they are also thinking about how to achieve an emotional impact.

The Wow Climax pulls together a range of essays written over the past decade and half that span different media (film, television, literature, games, comics), different genres (slapstick comedy, melodrama, horror, children’s fiction, exploitation cinema), and different emotional reactions (shock, laughter, sentimentality). Yet, when I read back through my essays, I discovered how consistently my writing had examined the connections between affect and aesthetics. These essays, for example, talk about the sentimentality at the heart of the *Lassie* franchise; examine the ways that horror filmmakers like Wes Craven and David Cronenberg and avant-garde artist Matthew Barney create fundamentally different kinds of emotional experiences while building upon many of the same themes and images; or explore what it might mean to view professional wrestling as a form of masculine melodrama. My methods encourage me to get as specific as possible in discussing the audience appeal and cultural significance of particular forms of popular culture. But each essay also contributes to a larger theoretical project—an attempt to understand the emotional dynamics of popular art.

How do we study the “wowness” of popular art? Insofar as all elements of popular media are shaped by this push toward intense emotional experience, we need to examine popular texts from multiple perspectives. The study of melodrama, for example, has focused on emotional elements that operate on the level of the narrative and characterization; the study of games or sports or martial arts looks at kinetic elements that may or may not be fully integrated into a story; work on comedy is very interested in gags but also in the kinds of gestures that reveal the distinctive personalities of comic performers. In writing about Hong Kong action films, Bordwell urges us to examine “their moment-by-moment texture”

because each moment of the film is designed to increase the immediacy of our experience.¹⁴

And yet, because this aesthetic is so focused on the audience's response, we can never understand it purely in formalist terms. Others have sought to understand affect through the lens of psychoanalysis or cognitive science; my preferred approach is to draw on tools of cultural analysis—to understand the contexts within which these works were produced and consumed, to map the meanings and sensations that become central to popular art at a particular historical juncture, and to explore the ways that cultural hierarchies respect or dismiss the affective dimensions of popular art or censorship codes reflect “thresholds of shame” that operate differently within different cultures.

These aspects of popular culture are difficult to understand from a stance of contemplative distance. To understand how popular culture works on our emotions, we have to pull it close, get intimate with it, let it work its magic on us, and then write about our own engagement. My personal pantheon of the best writers on popular culture (including George Lipsitz, Scott Bukatman, Richard Dyer, Alex Doty, Lynn Spigel, Robin Woods, John Hartley) almost all seem to be involved in a similar project of capturing their own subjective responses to popular texts and using them as a point of entry into understanding larger cultural processes and aesthetic issues. Unfortunately, various forms of distancing have been built into the theoretical traditions and aesthetic categories through which we study popular culture. So much stands between scholars and the works in question, and even more stands between academics and the publics that consume popular culture. These barriers are often more imagined than real, but they deform our writing, making it harder to ask certain questions or share particular insights. These essays represent an ongoing search for a new critical language that expresses how popular art makes us feel.

In some cases, the essays are openly autobiographical, as in my reflections about how superhero comics helped me to mourn my mother's death, my memories of the dog I had as a boy, or my consideration of the differences between the kinds of play spaces my son and I had growing up. In some cases, the essays are ethnographic, as in my examination of the ways kindergarteners used *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* as a vehicle for exploring their competing feelings of pleasure and shame toward their own disruptive conduct. In some cases, the essays draw on close reading, as in my consideration of the cultural work that gets performed through senti-

mental constructions of childhood and pets in the Lassie books, films, and television series; or on formal analysis, as in my attempt to determine the aesthetic principles that shape contemporary game design; or on discursive analysis, as in my exploration of the scandal that surrounded Lupe Velez's screen career. Each essay comes at its topic from a slightly different angle, but when combined in this collection they map a range of core questions we might want to ask about the interplay of affect and aesthetics in popular art.

Note that I am using the somewhat archaic term *popular art* here rather than the more current and common *popular culture*. Popular art emphasizes the aesthetic and affective logics that shape the production of commercial entertainment; popular culture, as it has emerged, speaks to the integration of those commercial texts into the everyday lives of their consumers. Both concepts are worth holding onto as we attempt to understand the centrality of entertainment to life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The move to talk about popular culture has been enormously valuable, helping us to think about the relations between production and consumption. Even among popular artists, there has been a tendency to reject claims of artistic status for works that were produced purely for entertainment purposes. I have several times lately found myself locked into debates with prominent game designers, for example, who were convinced that their work could not be seen as art because it was produced according to commercial impulses. This dismissal of popular art impacts the ways that art critics celebrate Matthew Barney's borrowings from the horror cinema without taking seriously the artistic ambitions of the filmmakers, such as David Cronenberg and Clive Barker, from whom he draws inspiration. You see it when judges decide that video games do not deserve constitutional protections because they do not constitute meaningful forms of expression. The power to speak about aesthetic value carries enormous political and cultural weight. The challenge is to find ways to talk about popular entertainment on its own terms, to respect the critical sensibilities of media producers and consumers without imposing top-down standards about what constitutes artistic merit.

Implicit in the subtitles I use throughout this book is an appreciation of earlier authors—Walter De Leon, Sergei Eisenstein, Gilbert Seldes, and Robert Warshaw, among them—who wrote with great passion about what they saw as emergent forms of popular art. In deploying some of their core concepts to frame this book, I want to reclaim the category of

popular art, with an understanding that aesthetic appreciation is complementary, not antagonistic, to the goals of understanding these works from social, cultural, ideological, or economic perspectives. The essays contained here certainly take up core concerns of gender, generation, class, race, and sexuality that have been central to the study of popular culture, but they often approach those debates from a different angle. These essays show that examining the sentimental construction of dogs, the feminist inflection of exploitation cinema, or the melodramatic dimensions of traditional masculine culture can be powerful ways of locating and understanding the “hot buttons” of a society.

The first section, “The Lively Arts,” starts with a consideration of the relationship between high art and popular culture. The first essay resurrects Gilbert Seldes’s concept of the lively arts to explore in what sense we might think of computer and video games as art. The second essay reverses polarities, showing how contemporary avant-garde artist Matthew Barney is indebted to his borrowings from various popular artists.

The second section, “The Immediate Experience,” shifts focus to the ways popular culture plays with powerful emotions and controversial content. These essays deal with sex, violence, and trauma. At heart, they are asking who is allowed to express what emotions in what contexts.

The essays in the final section, “Welcome to the Playground,” read children’s culture as caught between children’s desires and adult’s expectations. Each essay asks us to think about the meanings associated with children’s play, the ways adults shape children’s fantasy lives in order to mold children’s developing minds, and the gap between the reality of children’s everyday experience and the world offered them through popular culture.

Let the show begin.