

ELODIE PONG
AFTER THE EMPIRE

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ELODIE PONG: “QUOTE, UNQUOTE”

“Image, impersonation, celebrity, performance: all are questions in a sense of our imaginary identification with other people. When we identify with people, we imagine we are like them, or aspire to be like them, or with them [...] [Marilyn] Monroe once said: ‘I’ve never fooled anyone. I’ve let people fool themselves. They didn’t bother to find out who and what I was. Instead they would invent a character for me. I wouldn’t argue with them. They were obviously loving somebody I wasn’t.’”¹

There’s a scene in Elodie Pong’s 2008 film *After the Empire* where a Marilyn Monroe impersonator performs a rendition of Happy Birthday, addressing the song to herself, to her own ‘birthday’, as if in a gesture of narcissistic self-appraisal. Of course, Monroe actually once sung this to President John F Kennedy, in a highly stage-managed performance that carried its own perverse artificiality and which initiated a wealth of unsubstantiated rumours about an affair between the two. Perhaps this was also the moment when politics and celebrity became bedfellows in their own right. Certainly, the former now seems to aspire to the conditions of fame: name recognition, likeability, and the triangulation of distinct ideological positions into a vaguely non-committal middle ground where nobody can say exactly what politicians stand for (and which is, in itself, a post-ideological representation of egalitarian democracy). In place of a firmly resolute leader, voters choose the candidate who appears genial, unthreatening, familiar. One can simply project their assumptions and expectations onto the politician’s media-friendly persona.

This is also Monroe’s appeal, to both audiences and impersonators. As Laura Mulvey has pointed out: “Marilyn’s own form of cosmetic appearance is particularly fascinating, because it is so artificial, so mask-like, that she manages to use her performance to ‘comment on’ or ‘draw attention to’ or ‘foreground’ both its constructedness and its vulnerability and stability.”² Throughout Pong’s film, history is represented precisely through such personae – Batman, Elvis, Karl Marx, Minnie Mouse and Martin Luther King – whose contemporary relevance lies in their determined artificiality. They serve as ciphers or screens, imbued with the characteristics required by an ever-changing audience. Furthermore, they know it. So, in *After the Empire*, the contemporary suspicion of Batman and Robin as an essentially homoerotic pairing (and when exactly did that idea take hold in the public perception?) is brought up-to-date in their flirtatious exchange, as if finally, fully realising the inherent campness of their relationship. Robin is, by turns, needy and coquettish, pleading for validation (“Do you like my breasts?”) and pulling back when Batman goes too far. His coy manner, however, stems not from physical insecurity but from the essential falseness of the situation, with even the dialogue lifted from the conversation between Brigitte Bardot and Michel Piccoli in Jean-Luc Godard’s 1963 film *Le Mépris*. Filmed against a photographic backdrop of Hiroshima, Pong posits our caped superheroes as trapped in a post-war purgatory, the aftermath of the demonstration of American power.

It’s notable that most of these impersonated figures date from the distinct historical period of 1950s and early 1960s America, at its height of commercial triumphalism (Marx, of course,

resides in the shadows of the capitalist dream). In fact, it’s worth asking exactly which ‘empire’ we’re talking about here: the era of Cold War rivalry between twin superpowers, exercising their authority through proxy wars and diplomatic stand-offs; the moment of liberal democracy’s unparalleled rule, shortsightedly defined by Francis Fukuyama as “the end of history” (and apparently dismissed by Margaret Thatcher, ever the grocer’s daughter, as “the beginning of nonsense!”); or the current free-for-all altercations between different groups and ideologies against a backdrop of Samuel Huntington’s so-called ‘clash of civilisations’.³ Certainly, the figures portrayed stem from the era of idealised American supremacy, locked in mutual antagonism with a communist adversary and belligerently certain of its own righteousness. But, in Pong’s film, a creeping self-consciousness infects their characterisations, a gradual awareness that their shiny celebrity appeal has become irrelevant or, even worse, old-fashioned. It is as if, devoid of the ideological Other, one is left to wonder: “now what do I do?”

For these characters, dislocated from the world they once knew, one can only wonder what happens when the narrative of the American Empire has reached its final credits. Much like Pong’s other film here, *Endless Ends* (2009), with its repetition of the final closing frames of numerous movies, frozen at the point of ‘The End’ (or ‘Fin’), the appropriation of certain tropes is used to refer to the self-enclosed space of the cinematic narrative. Just as this work, screened in the front space of the gallery, re-structures the concluding instants of various, unidentified films (except where their iconic layout renders them recognisable, as in *Psycho* or *Some Like It Hot*) into an interminable loop of static images, the figures in *After the Empire* endlessly play out their roles, quoting themselves (and others), as if nothing exists besides the camera’s gaze.

Film therefore seems to offer an endless reservoir of characteristics, phrases and gestures that can be used to represent an otherwise unknowable self. Its conventions and archetypes are recognisable; an effective way of understanding and articulating those qualities that are often too manifold, too contradictory to permanently grasp. Amidst the celebrities and cartoons of *After the Empire*, a character based on the artist’s grandmother, Frieda, appears on screen, relating her experience as an illegitimate child in rural Switzerland. Upon discovering her father’s whereabouts, she visits his store only to be told that “it’s closed, the owner died five days ago.” Even here, identity is contingent on the other, on the individual whose presence offers the possibility of self-knowledge. Yet, the sequence remains fraught with uncertainty; Frieda is herself a fiction, a semi-autobiographical construct who represents authenticity. The ‘real’ is subjected to the postmodern dissolution of established ideals, where the adaptability of the signifier can mean both anything and nothing. If the characters in Pong’s film once represented the spectacle of celebrity, the certitude of American hegemony, and the trauma of history in an era of ideological grand narratives, their recontextualisation as impersonations of empty values speaks just as strongly about the political terrain we currently exist within.

At one point, a black woman mimes to the words of Martin Luther King, stating that: “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight.” Did King intend to mean the leveling of all difference, so that individuals are offered equal opportunities,



the freedom to occupy any persona, to willfully take on other attributes and identities and to discard them just as flippantly? The appropriation of interchangeable signs, emptied of all content due to their equivalence of value, seems here to signal incommunicable isolation. Elvis attempts to flirt with a young Japanese woman, clad in a playfully provocative Minnie Mouse costume, by espousing song lyrics from his back catalogue even though the difference in language renders any connection impossible. Yet would it have worked in any case? His borrowing of trite romantic sentiments and her determined sexual availability (at one point, she states: “my pussy is the new black”) suggests an unbridgeable divide; their only shared interest is self-interest. Similarly, the film’s closing passage pairs Marx with Monroe, attempting to impress upon each other the virtues of temporal mechanics and eternal love. He looks on as she rhapsodises, and the film cuts to footage of running street battles, rioting protesters, and the haze of tear gas, which drifts into their own scenario. “History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce,” he explains.

And third? When history has reached its end, and then suddenly, without warning, starts up all over again? Except, this time, it isn’t split down the middle, between unfettered capitalism and intractable communism, nor consolidated into a victorious consumerist democracy, but is fragmented, multiple, composed of undisclosed allegiances and simmering antagonisms.⁴ There is, at the end of *After the Empire*, the introduction of pounding electronic music by Calvin Harris, repeating the line “this is the industry”, and the title, stretched across the screen. Is this, then, merely a prelude to another, inconclusive and inaccessible narrative? Does it represent only a prologue, answering its own question in the footage that unravels off-screen and out of shot? Is there a happy ending after the empire?

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¹ Sarah Churchwell, “Marilyn Monroe and Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Ladies”, *The Guardian*, Review, December 9, 2011, p. 3.

² Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996) p. 48.

³ “World politics is entering a new phase, and intellectuals have not hesitated to proliferate visions of what it will be - the end of history, the return of traditional rivalries between nation states, and the decline of the nation state from the conflicting pulls of tribalism and globalisation, among others [...] It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural.” Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilisations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, Summer, 1993, p. 22.

⁴ “Today, for example, the true antagonism is not between liberal multiculturalism and fundamentalism, but between the very field of their opposition and the excluded Third (radical emancipatory politics).” Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, (London: Verso, 2009) p.384.

