

'Alas! They never did': Mark Aerial Waller's Reversions

Mike Sperlinger, 2008

Our simplistic sense of our ancestors' almost total belief in their myths is matched by our confident disbelief in our own. One definition of popular culture would be that it is elective, something that one affirms or denies at will, individually – that is, consumable.

In the nineteenth century Benjamin Constant had already sensed, in a way that both precedes and exceeds the insights of psychology, that we are always more *and* less invested in our loves and our rituals than we can ever acknowledge, or as he put it in his novella *Adolphe*: "There is no complete unity in man, and almost no one is ever entirely sincere nor entirely insincere." Popular culture, so-called, is predicated on disposability, disavowing its own compulsive traits, and ours.

The lasting legacy of Surrealism is the insight that the desire to ascribe disposability is a profound and metaphysical mark of shame, which is belied by the deathless, mythic endurance of our supposed cultural detritus. Of course, culture at large attempts to administer such embarrassing wreckage, by repackaging it as fodder for hypertrophied, ironic tastes – 'cult' culture. But the cultic aspect is the giveaway: the survival of our crappiest archetypes is proof that we are not free of them. The only possible escape is sideways, out of what Mark Aerial Waller once called "the vortex of prejudice," and into a space where we recognise both our reflection in the mirror and the possibility of stepping through it. Waller's work has always operated by refraction and diversion, much in the manner of the paranoid conspiracies that are often its content.

Viewed holistically, it is a matrix of occult and suspect, selective connections between a seemingly impossible variety of historical sources: first-hand accounts of nuclear tests, Greek tragedy, British television science-fiction, pulp serials, the films of Georges Franju, daytime soap operas, the writings of St Augustine... What weaves them together is anachronism, in all its forms: from literal time travel (the Senegalese science fiction of *Superpower – Dakar Chapter*, 2004) to more uncanny temporal confusions (devotees playing back the sounds 'recorded' in ancient ceramics in *The Sons of Temperance* [2000], like archaeological versions of Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of its Own Making*; or the peculiar navy ship in *Midwatch* [2000], which seems to straddle 1954 and Nelson's time). But the register in which this temporal clashes take place tends to be uncertain and disorienting.

The great neglected film writer Raymond Durgnat once described the temporality of Franju's film *Judex* (1963) – a key work for Waller and the subject of one of his Wayward Canon events – as "the negative subjunctive, the tense of 'If only things still happened like this, but they don't, and, alas! They never did...'" The result is a kind of self-cancelling nostalgia, which is, in fact, authentically mythic – a useful analogue for Waller's deeply unsentimental versions of the pasts which contaminate our present. "Pray to the future," intones regular Waller performer Douglas Park flatly, in his role as Orestes in *The Flips side of Darkness*.

Waller's whole approach is 'wayward' because it cleaves so thoroughly to the principle of displacement, and not simply of the temporal kind. He has sometimes been known to call his salon-type events "reinterpretations" of the films presented, but this tends to understate their radicality. Yes, the films he shows are unhinged from those canons and contexts which normalise them and are effectively their guarantors – whether it is because they are dismembered (episodes of *Batman* and *Fantomas* in *La Société des Amis de Judex*), agglomerated (episodic television serials turned into epic, convivial theatre in *The Sun Set* and *My Kleine Fassbinderbar*), or admixed with other works (Bunuel's *Simon of the Desert* expanded into the portmanteau disco experience of *Simon and the Radioactive Flesh*). But the Wayward Canon events are also notable for how the audience itself is also constituted eccentrically – or, as Waller puts it, "the way the audience might not realise it's the audience."

Above all, Waller's activities have gradually evinced the erosion of the distinction between his own work and these 'secondary', parasitic practices – in other words, it is his own work which is ultimately displaced, or transformed by its cross-fertilisation with the work of his predecessors and contemporaries. This has little or nothing to do with the contemporary, modish frisson of artists posing as curators, and something to do with a more profoundly subversive sense – something Waller shares with David Lamelas, an otherwise very different artist – of the impossibility of delimiting a context, a horizon for interpretations. In particular, when Waller's video *The Reversion of the Beast Folk* (2003), a modernized digest of H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau*, was shown as part of a programme curated by Ian White at the Ciné Lumière in London in 2004, its climax of a black screen with a soundtrack of ritual Brazilian Umbanda music was completed by a site-specific flourish: the raising of the blinds in the cinema, so that daylight suddenly illuminated the space. This expansion of *mise en scène* from a formal, filmic consideration into an expanded, miscegenous playfulness implicating the viewer has set the tone for Waller's activities since, as his 'films' have increasingly become dispersed into events and environments.

Paradoxically, at the same time his work has invested increasingly in the qualities of the endless loop. "Where will it all end?," asks Clytaemnestra's voice at the 'beginning' of *The Flipside of Darkness* (2008). But resolution is denied, or averted, by more than Waller's abridgment of Aeschylus's play (which involves, amongst other things, the elision of Clytaemnestra's murder). In fact, like much of Waller's work, the video adopts the form of a loop wholeheartedly, rather than just as an expedient of gallery exhibition. The notion of mythic circularity and repetition is combined with an explicit sense of futility; tragedy is retained only allusively, as the forces of destiny and linear narrative seem to wither in the face of indifference and pockets of non-diegetic repose – two ducks in the gardens of Stara Pomarańczarnia, the actresses on a smoking break with the lighting rig in shot. Nietzsche's remark that, if we say that man has character, we say only that he has an experience that repeats, takes on an air of second-order bathos; these characters cohere only through the reiteration of the loop. The now-fractured plot tends to dissolve into décor, Clytaemnestra's recollection of her portentous dream lost amid the dials of an antiquated-looking generator room, complete with oblivious operators. Drama is divested of its sense of forward momentum, let alone progress, and revealed as a form of serious clowning. Here as elsewhere, Waller posits myth as routine, and vice versa. Routine is the fate of ritual in a service economy. The great mythic stratum by which the ancients understood the world, a timescale which was always the present, contemporary to the telling, has decayed at this point into homogenized repetition.

We can no longer tell the difference between a deity and a shift worker – we might think too, for example, of Powell and Pressburger's film *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), in which angels are simply a higher form of civil servant. Much of Waller's work touches on the ambiguous agency of the functionary or factotum, whose very anonymity is perhaps the source of their power. This strange combination of the ineffectual and the omnipotent is perfectly captured by the eponymous character in *Interview with a Nuclear Contract Worker* (1996), who ends his monologue by suggesting: We [the shift workers in the nuclear power station], I suppose as much as individuals as a general collective force, are almost some kind of driving power... Both if you think of it as with the atom, you know, in purely scientific, functional terms, at that sort of level – something that makes things happen in a real modern world. But also, I think, perhaps more deeply, we almost are in some way more celestial, or perhaps divinely appointed. It couldn't happen without us. It is worth remembering, however, that in the companion piece *Glow Boys* (1999) the radiation-addled worker is gunned down as game and ends the film as a kind of sacrificial victim, his dead body apparently powering a suburban home. The collision of the scientific and the cosmic is insistent, but ultimately delusional – as the minatory quotation from "Blair" in *The Flipside of Darkness* hints ("The Kaleidoscope has been shaken, now is our time to re-order the pieces"), the masters of the universe are probably not to be found pulling literal levers.