

4. Platforming

(an excerpt from the book **High Entertainment** by David Robbins)

A platform is a context, medium, or venue for the presentation of people, events, objects, or information. An art gallery is a platform, as is a radio show, as is a TV variety show, as is a magazine, as is a certain kind of website (YouTube, Flickr, My Space...).

The one who innovates the platform and works actively with it as a medium for the presentation of others is a “platformist.” The platformist is a kind of artist — an artist at presenting others. This presentation of others, of all the world’s variety — whether it’s people or objects — is the territory of the producer, the impresario and the collector.

Platforming as a conscious pursuit is a fairly recent development in our evolution. We look to P.T. Barnum for its roots.

Barnum

Phineas Taylor Barnum was a serial inventor of venues and strategies for the public presentation of people, events, objects, or information. Platforms were Barnum’s medium.

Barnum’s first foray into platforming occurred in the 1830s with his purchase of one Joice Heth, an elderly black woman who claimed to be the infant George Washington’s nursemaid. Sensing the theatrical value of her claims whilst suspending judgment about their veracity (he could neither prove nor disprove them), Barnum paid three thousand dollars for Heth and promoted her in what proved to be an exceedingly successful road show. His next big discovery was midget “General” Tom Thumb. Midgets and dwarves had enjoyed a long history at court but Tom Thumb of Connecticut added an American angle. He was independent, educated, a wit — and, for Barnum, another success: the General was even received by the English queen, Victoria. Following Tom Thumb, Barnum scored another success with singer Jenny Lind, “the Swedish nightingale,” brought over from Europe and toured before American audiences to near-riots of acclaim. And for decades, on went Barnum’s presentations.

An old black woman whose place in history could neither be proved nor disproved, a pint-sized bon vivant, a Swedish songstress celebrated, in part, for her lack of artifice — what did these and other “acts” have in common? Why, P.T. Barnum, of course. Impresario Barnum was the reliable constant in the ever-changing show he offered his fellow Americans. He effectively made his taste a validating context: audiences never paid to see Barnum himself but to see what Barnum had found, or discovered, or just thought worth their while.... Eventually, his reputation became such that people bought tickets *because* a certain performer, he or she or it (Jumbo the elephant comes to mind), was being presented by Barnum. They trusted him to put on a good show, and he delivered. An eye for talent? Sure, but Barnum’s impresario instincts were far more sophisticated than that. He saw that talent wasn’t essential to an act’s potential success. Properly presented, the natural — people just being themselves, provided they were the right people — could be just as good a draw as a unique or rare *ability*. And why? The species had an innate curiosity about itself; people were interested in other people. This insight of Barnum’s, a simple idea but profound when implemented, argued on behalf of the fullest possible variety of human experience (there’s a direct line from P.T. Barnum

to Jerry Springer, and another, equally direct, to the “reality television” phenomenon). And, ever desiring to be of service, he complied. The rationale for his eclectic selections became part of the audience’s experience of his shows, of course, their subtext. Wittingly or not, his audiences shelled out for contact with or exposure to an abstraction: Barnum’s enterprise.

It all added up to a powerful presentational aesthetic that was transparent, modern — and distinctly American. By democratizing the stage, Barnum put his own imprint on what Leo Braudy identifies as “the central American question of how to bring together the varying individualities of the American people into something resembling a coherent nation.” ^[1] The egalitarian DNA that had been encoded in the U.S. Constitution, and which in turn the Constitution encoded into the culture, seeks and finds implementation through the American platformist. Benjamin Franklin, with his invention of the public library, is one example. P.T. Barnum is another. But it didn’t just satisfy American conditions. It was a bigger idea than even that. Barnum had innovated a rationale for putting life itself on stage.

Warhol

During the phase of nation building which necessarily occupied the imagination, energies, and resources of the United States during its first two hundred years, the ongoing dialogue between the platforming impulse and America’s egalitarian obsessions received special emphasis. Toward the end of the nineteenth century and over the course of the twentieth, ambitious and innovative platformists would contribute the creation of the telephone, the movie studio, radio and TV networks, finally culminating in a World Wide Web which transcended national boundaries entirely. Always, the most fundamental, lasting platforms allowed the display of a mind-boggling amount and variety of human ability; at the same time, they centered tremendous power among the individuals who owned and operated them. In an era of media empires and communication moguls, vast platforms, chiefly based, as it happened, on electronics and chemicals, were controlled by a few. (Some, such as William Randolph Hearst and William Paley, were individuals who, like Barnum, were closely identified with their platforms, while other ownership arrangements were more corporate and anonymous.)

The platforming impulse — innovating a system or venue that is designed to present — was evidence of the machine’s deep penetration of the human psyche. (Barnum’s active years coincide with the first wave of the Industrial Revolution in the United States.) For it represented the emergence of the Systems Man. A pragmatic creature, Systems Man challenged the romantic idea of the artist. Although the modern communication era did retain the place where the artist stood, the old model of the existential poet of individuality, that overly-ornate creature, now faced territorial competition from a more streamlined and impersonal sort of communication specialist. In place of an ongoing exploration of individual subjectivity, the visionaries of the telecommunication, broadcasting, and computer industries would find expression in promotion, distribution, and real social power. Welding platforming instincts to muscular and efficient corporate frameworks, they became all the “artist” the expanding business culture would require. And from a certain perspective, this was not incorrect. The work which this state-of-the-art communication professional engaged in was arguably more modern, impactful, and

far-seeing than that of any traditional, art-context-based artist; greater numbers of people were required to adapt to the former's perception, certainly.

The first person to thematize the essential nation-building activity of platform-creation, and to embody it, was Andy Warhol. He was more than another Systems Man, because he took being a Systems Man as his subject. He also recognized the complex human dynamic at the center of the platformist's personal location — specifically, the simultaneous passivity and power of The One Who Presents — and proceeded to push the dynamic hard, aggressively forging a profound confusion of Presenter and Presented.

Whereas Barnum put ancient Joice Heth on stages from Boston to Charleston, Warhol filmed 1960s socialite/"It" girl Baby Jane Holzer with a Bolex for the duration of a single three-minute 16mm film reel, then projected it. Though he shares Barnum's democratic, collection-and-presentation obsession he aggressively modernizes it by shifting it onto recordable, reproducible media. The leap is enormous, and its implications radiate outward in every direction. And this transpositional strategy is hardly limited to the Screen Test reels; Warhol's other early movies echo Barnum, too. The *Screen Tests* (someone just looking into, and being looked at by, a lens), and films like *Sleep*, *Kiss*, and *Eat* (film records of, respectively, sleeping, kissing, eating) present basic human acts as subjects worthy of an audience's time and consideration. Exploring recordable media's capacity to collapse stage time and literal time, and presenting performance in an everyday manner while elevating the everyday to the level of a performance, Warhol pioneers a strategic naturalism. Never a fantasist, ever a re-presenter of the actual, Warhol inhabits a "world in which...it is never necessary to invent," commented Stephen Koch.

Thus, as Barnum had, Warhol established a context for the presentation of things that already exist. None of it *needed* to be presented again. It was already real; showing it again didn't make it more real. Therefore something about the act of presenting it again was, had to be, a form of theater, a sort of joke on the real. Everything that Warhol's Factory did — its films; its fabrication of film "superstars;" its re-presenting in objects and paintings the potent images circulating through and via mass media and consumer society; its magazine, *Interview* — worked some angle on this, essentially comic insight. Warhol wasn't just interested in being a successful, independent platformist. He was interested in *platforming* — activity, social transaction, condition of mind. He extended and modernized Barnum's model of public presence by thematizing it. The Factory was an American thing, a new world, a small colony like the Fourierists or the Owenists or the Mormons. Jonas Mekas: "Warhol is like America.... [T]he essentials ("the Revolution") come from Warhol, and the particulars, the materials, the people come from everywhere and they are molded and held together by a central spirit, Andy Warhol...." Not only was it a new world, it was a new world whose content was, really, itself. Consistently aligning his psychology and his aesthetic sensibility with the machinery and media by which he engineered his presentation strategies, namely the absolute neutrality of the camera or tape-recorder, Warhol transformed himself into an *emblem* of his presentational strategy. He sought to become, and succeeded in becoming, a figure who never judged and endlessly presented — and endlessly *permitted*, too, for to withhold judgment is to permit. The world had never seen anyone choose to turn himself into an emblem of the machine's penetration of human

experience. No wonder he made people nervous. For a great many people Andy's game was, and still is, a little too modern.

The showman is part of the show. Barnum knew it, and applied the knowledge. Warhol knew it, too, and obsessively foregrounded the platformist's process — observing, selecting, the technologies of presenting — as part of the comedy. In P.T. Barnum's day the confusion of background and foreground had been powerful yet still implicit, a subtext; Andy Warhol, by contrast, used it actively and aggressively — he concretized the confusion, made it *the point*. Distilling the abstractions of passivity and power implicit in the platformist's work, he laid bare yet more pure abstraction: the abstraction of "people," the abstraction of "presenting." The fame Warhol quickly achieved allowed him to pursue "the glamorous peace of existing only in the eye of the beholder." [2] He willingly, eagerly vanishes into his public self. Culturally omnipresent and at the same time unknowable — more high comedy — Warhol ascends to a quintessence of celebrity, the purest symbol yet of the modern public life initiated by Barnum in the 1800s.

Warhol establishes some of the essentials of modern platforming: media, with the possibility of a personal or conceptual angle — platforming *thematized*.

Windows of Synthetic Time

Let's look more closely at modern media's relation to platforming. What are the core materials utilized? Structurally speaking, there are two: time and space.

Time is the more essential. In fact the story of modern media, after the telephone, is the story of the shift of emphasis from space to time. What do I mean by this? Barnum worked in real space — real performers presented on a real stage, real objects presented in real vitrines, and all of it occupying the same space you occupied. Now consider a TV or a radio. The hardware — tiny little machines — exists in real space too but without fundamentally altering real space. TV and radio do fundamentally alter the experience of *time*, however. Time-based media — TV, film, radio — absorb time. They *absorb* the time you give them. That time is then gone forever.

Modern communications media exist to create synthetic time and to establish a substructure of synthetic time within real time. What's synthetic time? Think of a pop song. The notes are arranged within a frame of time recorded on a stable medium. Every time you play that record, the arrangement of notes fixed in synthetic time will be the same. Every recorded song, every movie, every TV show, is based on this idea of synthetic time. Many things can happen within a window of synthetic time. Musical notes and images can be arranged an infinite variety of ways.

Synthetic time complicates both the individual's experience of time and the community's relation to time. This, because however small the window of time utilized by a particular communication unit — a half-hour TV sitcom, a three-minute pop song — its *need for time* is bottomless. Without time from you, it is nothing. But with each spin of that three-minute pop song, three minutes of your time are diverted into a) that pop song and b) the synthetic time upon which that pop song depends. Individual time, community time, an entire society's time is absorbed by/escapes into a communication product.

Time, then, far more than space, stands as the core material of twentieth century communication. Is there no corresponding and equally ambitious re-organization of our experience of space? Of course: if you and I are watching the same TV show at the same time while living in different cities, hasn't space been caused to collapse, in a way? How can that not be considered radical? It is radical. And yet: consider the actions involved here, note the verbs: media *conquer*, *compress*, and *collapse* space, while media *expand* the ways in which time might be spent. Modern communications media negate space and expand time. The latter, positive force is the more powerful, because it contains the most possibility. If it's indeed so that, as Robert Toll observes, "once a major entertainment medium became popular, it never disappeared, though innovations often forced major changes in the content, format, and audience of existing entertainment machines," the reason these communication technologies thrived was because they extended some core sensory experience — vision or sound or both — via a synthetic frame of time. A recording is not only *capable* of supporting frames of synthetic time, its *capacity for doing so* is the reason why that particular medium survived.

YouTube etc.

The story of twentieth-century communication is fundamentally expressed, then, as a story of synthetic time.

And the story has a pattern. First, a new communication technology — phonograph album, movie, radio, TV — is invented that establishes a new, unfamiliar condition of artificial time. Next, the condition of artificial time established by that communication technology gets *divided up* into specialized units (genres, shows, stations, channels intended for specific demographic groups at specific times of day). A third phase, resulting from a further evolution of communication hardware (audiotape recorder, VCR recorder, DVD burner), *increases the consumer's control over and production of* artificial time. As the consumer gains more control over artificial time he becomes less passive, which in turn situates him in *a more complex consumer/producer role*.

The above pattern played out in communication technologies from about 1890 to 1990. The Internet, which began as an information-sharing technology — a spatial emphasis if ever there was one — changed that pattern. Able to platform all of the previous incarnations of synthetic time, the Internet establishes another template. While the Internet speeds up the rate of dissemination of video/movies and audio, and disperses them across a wider field, the forms themselves remain the basic occasions for synthetic time production that they had been fifty, sixty, seventy, eight years ago. That aspect of communication culture is stable — which, taking the long view, means that the core experience of "entertainment" in the modern era (namely, various ways to fill regularized units of synthetic time) has not been fundamentally altered by the Internet. Thus, when I as an independent imagination engage media to generate synthetic time for the purpose of building an audience for some experience built on a foundation of synthetic time, I am made to confront the same questions addressed in their own, respective eras by D.W. Griffith, *Kay Kyser's College of Musical Knowledge*, *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, Andy Warhol, and *The Sopranos*. What do I put into the frame of synthetic time to gain and hold an audience? What can I make work *as entertainment* within a frame of synthetic time?

YouTube

If I seem to be posing the question in an almost perversely basic, wide open way, it is because the digital revolution has handed us a situation that, for the first time in a very long time, is just that wide open.

In terms of time-based media, two main factors are shaping the High Entertainment sensibility. The first and most profound is the idea that we can now operate as genuinely independent imaginations un beholden to either the art or the entertainment production systems — a theme developed throughout this booklet. The second factor — with regard to spans of synthetic time, a far-reaching change in tastes — is more platform-specific.

Forty years ago, when inexpensive video technology was first introduced, the fashion was to turn the camera on and just leave...it...on...to record whatever happened. (Initially, *everything* looks interesting on a new medium, right?) Also, editing a video was a much more complicated matter in those days, so it was more efficient to use the camera as both the recording *and* the editing device — something to turn on or off. Artists' early use of videotape, which coincided with the heydays of conceptual, body, and performance art, was geared, as a result, to a “long-form” aesthetic characterized by repetitiveness, self-indulgence, and boredom; not entertainment but art (and whatever experience could be discovered through art) was the point of these (now mostly forgotten) forays. In strong contrast, today's websites such as YouTube are propelling video in the opposite direction: toward a radical brevity. YouTube, which went online in February 2005, imposes limits on the file-size of video clips and consequently on their duration. (YouTube first imposed these limits for legal reasons: to avoid hosting excessive use of copyrighted film and television material.) While YouTube can accommodate video clips of up to ten minutes in length, it's much more common to encounter there videos that may be only, say, a minute long at most. Short, sweet, and to the point is the rule now.

The effect that an emphasis on brevity is having on the independent imagination shouldn't be underestimated, for in establishing a context that naturalizes the production of short videos YouTube and similar websites indirectly ask us to consider what is entertaining. Now that the imagination need no longer fill those regularized units of time (the ninety-minute feature film, the half-hour sitcom) that had defined media's modernist phase, it turns out that the narrative tissue that had gone into “story-telling” no longer seems necessary. In other words, YouTube, as a platform, makes sense of showing a car chase without also bothering with *the reason for* the car chase. The old, regimented time-formats were always an artifice, of course; abandoning that artifice fosters experiments that relax or dissolve the genres it had served. A look at YouTube's “tagging” search-system, which puts things in many buckets at once (an example from one clip, again arbitrarily selected: “lego animation bowling guitar competition”) clearly signals a move away from the old constraints of genre — Drama, Thriller, Comedy, Mystery. The idea of categorizing narratives as the video store had is giving way to another taxonomic system that is at once much broader, more focused, and more complex.

The social aspects of YouTube and similar sites are important too, of course. That the content is user-generated, authored by millions and decentralized, shouldn't be given

short shrift. There's no curating on YouTube, other than to monitor excessive violence, explicit sex, and copyright infringement. Also, by fashioning an entirely different distribution system than the old, one-way, producer-to-consumer entertainment system, YouTube and like sites have fostered a communication aesthetic based on sharing rather than profit-making. "Broadcast Yourself" — YouTube's credo — encourages everyone who can get their hands on a video camera to participate. This democratization of mass communication production broadens the definition of the mainstream by making it far more inclusive. That said, whether you're creating videos in Bombay, Brooklyn, or Bogota, you've still got to deal with that ten-minute time-limit. As concerns *an evolution in entertainment*, the change in duration remains the engine. When you're watching a clip on YouTube, you're making contact with all this. And all this, as much as the clip itself, is what holds our attention, satisfies, and entertains. YouTube allows the independent imagination to re-configure entertainment at a small, easily managed scale. What's discovered through these experiments will eventually be applied to entertainments of longer duration.

[1] Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*

[2] Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*