

What Next? A Future Beyond Postmodernity in Washburn's Post-Capitalist Realist America

'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (*Capitalist Realism* 8). This statement, articulated by Mark Fisher (in an attempt to bring Fredric Jameson's ideas about the postmodern closer to the 21st century) expresses the anxieties of the neoliberal west in the grips of what Fisher calls 'capitalist realism' – a theory which argues that late capitalism has homogenised the cultural environment of individuals to the extent that a coherent future beyond the absolute supremacy of late capitalism cannot be articulated, or even conceived (*Capitalist Realism* 8). As a consequence of this ideological supremacy, popular cultural expression is commodified and valued by its recognisable subscription to previously popular forms. This 'nostalgia mode', as Jameson terms it, adds to this feeling of temporal impasse, as attempts to articulate the anxieties and yearnings of a community towards a new potentiality, or future, are lost amongst the seemingly endless cycle of postmodern pastiche and revivalism – from film and TV revivals to the proliferation of pop culture references in speech. To draw on Lacan's concept of the 'Real', this nostalgia prevents us from grasping and expressing the anxieties over the 'Real' potential of nuclear catastrophe that the 'reality' of capitalist realism suppresses (Fisher *Capitalist Realism* 19). For Fisher, Jameson and contemporary America (or indeed the neoliberal west), the question is therefore 'what can possibly come next? What new future can evolve from capitalist realism and its empty nostalgia?' Anne Washburn's *Mr Burns* proposes an answer which echoes Fisher's 'end of the world' statement. Washburn's 'post-electric' play presents a future where nuclear destruction redefines the lived experience of Americans, and where the Simpsons, and other features of pop culture, evolve beyond the 'nostalgia mode' and become part of a new cultural mythology, one that expresses the anxieties and yearnings that pop culture once pacified. This essay will track how these cultural features are sculpted by the needs of the post-electric American - from the cohesive nostalgia of group storytelling in the first act, through the exploration of escapism and meaning in the second act, to the

performance of a shared history in the third act, which reflects a hope for the future. However, while popular culture in the play ultimately achieves the 'aesthetic representation of [...] current experience' lacking in contemporary culture (Jameson 9), Washburn's future also questions whether art and popular expression will ever be able to evade the trappings of commodification and capitalist realism.

In the first Act, Washburn uses a group's attempt to recount an episode of the Simpsons as a shared experience which unifies the characters in post-electric America, demonstrating initially how cultural expressions of the capitalist-realist nostalgia mode develop a new purpose. This is most evident in the arrival of a stranger, Gibson, to the camp of survivors. The brusque and impersonal relationship between outsider and group, demonstrated by Sam shutting Gibson up, Matt searching him, and the ensuing exchange of names of hoped-for survivors (limited by some consensual bureaucracy to 10 per person), is only relaxed after Gibson is able to contribute the line 'I'll stay away, *forever*' to the Simpsons episode the group are trying to remember (Washburn 22, 24-29, 36). The moment of social relaxation is emphasised by the tension of the group's misinterpretation of the line as a threat, as Jenny pulls her gun on Gibson until the group break into laughter after Gibson explains himself (Washburn 36). Only after this do the characters exchange their own names, signifying Gibson's de facto acceptance among the group. Washburn here demonstrates the importance of The Simpsons as a signifier of shared experience, as Gibson's contribution demonstrates their shared cultural affiliation, relaxing the austere formality and allowing a new community to form in the unfamiliar and dangerous landscape of post-electric America. In this way, the globally broadcast and internationally known story of the episode is re-localised and re-purposed to fit small community, allowing a contemporary audience to see how the popular cultural expressions that surround them can gain personal significance when the interaction between individual and popular culture is not reliant on the globalized and impersonal context of a capitalist realism. This is ratified by the way

storytelling necessitates collaboration and engagement, as without the globally accessible and personal formats of television and internet viewing, the group must work together to tell the story. In this scene, Washburn thus presents an alternative to the passive consumption of commodified popular culture, where the nostalgia of the episode is repurposed as something that reflects the needs of its audience (the need for common ground) rather than as a pacification for a community bereft of a sense of its cultural trajectory.

However, the play's second act insinuates a future where popular culture is not limited to the invocation of nostalgia, but is able to express the anxieties and yearnings of its audience. In contrast to the failure of pop culture in capitalist realist societies to 'grasp and articulate the present' (Fisher *Ghosts of My Life* 9), the medley of pop songs sung at the end of the second act demonstrates the evolution of popular culture beyond nostalgia, as despite the efforts of the characters to create an escapist nostalgic performance, the song subconsciously reflects the anxiety of their post-apocalyptic present. These '*popular hits from the last 10 years*' are sung '*without irony*' to the lyrics of what initially establishes itself as a cliché break-up pop ballad. However, in their attempt to mimic a break-up pop ballad, the song's expression of lost love becomes an implicit expression of the trauma of post-apocalyptic life; 'I'm drenched with tears [...] /This is the part where I say goodbye/(To everything its/The end of everything)' (Washburn 67-8). Washburn demonstrates how the character's subconscious desire for pathos, the desire to have their anxieties played out on stage, causes the attribution of meaning beyond the superficial affirmation of nostalgia that the lyrics are intended for. The unintentional nature of this creation of meaning is confirmed in Quincy's ardent support for 'Meaningless Entertainment' later in the scene (Washburn 70). However, the juxtaposition between subtext of post-apocalyptic anxiety and the text of cliché pop demonstrates the importance of capitalist realist context in limiting the ability of pop music to express meaning. Despite its cliché lyrics and pop compilation melody, it is performed outside of the capitalist realist

world where the superficial eclecticism and homogenisation of cultural experience prevents any one theme from resonating beyond the interest of commodification. Instead, in the context of an America where cultural experience is no longer dictated by capitalist realism, but has been reshaped by the trauma of an apocalyptic event, the song functions as an expression of this trauma, even though this is unintentional. The character's accidental expression of meaning is in ironic contrast with Mark Fisher's evaluation of contemporary capitalist realist pop culture, which asserts that, in the attempt to articulate the present, pop culture only succeeds in drawing on the commodified past's expressions of contemporaneity, and so can only function as a facet of Jameson's nostalgia mode (Fisher *Ghosts of My Life* 11). The character's performance of the medley in the second act thus demonstrates that it is not the nature of popular music, or pop culture, that prevents it from resonating meaningfully, but it is the homogenisation of people's cultural experience, as dictated by capitalist realism, that prevents us from connecting meaningfully to it – as Mark Fisher attests, culture cannot articulate the present because 'there is no present to grasp and articulate any more' (Fisher *Ghosts of My Life* 9).

In the third act, pop music is also used to explore how pop culture can develop meaning when removed from the context of capitalist realism. However, after the passage of 75 years in post-electric America, the theatrical performance taking place meta-theatrically within the third act (based on the discussion and performance of the Simpsons episode *Cape Feare* in the first and second acts) is no longer concerned with inspiring nostalgic escapism. Instead, pop music, the Simpsons episode and the other eclectic and disparate facets of cultural expression have been appropriated into a new cultural mythology for post-electric America. This is evident in the presentation of Mr Burns, whose replacement of Sideshow Bob as the villain of the *Cape Feare* narrative demonstrates how the episode has been altered (consciously or subconsciously) over time to support the character as the personification of the apocalypse. The association attached to the

figure of Burns, engendered by the television series, as a cruel, elderly and reactionary Power Station owner reinforces his character as a symbol of an uncaring conservative generation, who this mythology promotes as responsible for the neglect that caused the apocalypse. The incorporation of the Britney Spears song *Toxic* further develops the presentation Burns as a personification of the apocalypse itself. The song's lyrics 'oh you love what he does tho it's so very toxic' promote him as a representation of the lingering radiation poisoning from nuclear fallout, that wouldn't have occurred had it not been for a heedless infatuation for the electricity nuclear energy provided (Washburn 87). This presentation of Burns as the consequence of America's fatal attraction to nuclear power is ratified by the song's overt sexuality, which is appropriated from the well-known pop song and reassigned to Burns' attack on the child Lisa, evoking a jarring lecherous quality that reflects the grotesque perversion inflicted by nuclear fallout on the innocent people in America. This sexualised assault on Lisa during the song, in which Burns 'slowly slips his thumb into [Lisa's] mouth, derives from (and for the contemporary audience, references) the 1991 film *Cape Fear* in which Max Cady does the same to Danielle Bowden (played by Robert De Niro and Juliette Lewis respectively (Scorsese)). By incorporating these features from across popular culture, Washburn demonstrates how each feature has been uprooted from its original context in pre-apocalypse capitalist realism, and thus is able to be reassigned un-ironically within the world of post-apocalyptic America in combination with other (seemingly disparate) features of pop culture in a way that expresses a new meaning. The comedy of the references to pop culture in the play's post-electric context is disturbed by the efficacy of these features in their new purpose; although the image of Mr Burns singing a Britney Spears song still carries an uncanny humour, the efficacy of the appropriated features of pop culture in expressing the perverse nature of Burns' assault on Lisa affects this humour. The disrupted comedy of these references highlights the successful evolution of pop culture of beyond the nostalgia of capitalist realism, as the features of pop culture are able to express new meaning un-ironically. Washburn's final act therefore presents a future where postmodern pastiche (which Jameson expresses has destroyed the capability of art to present its own vision of the world through

a unique style (6)) is able to coalesce and function together to express something new. In the final act of *Mr Burns*, Washburn presents a future where features of pop culture have been disassociated from their past contexts that restricted their ability to express anything other than nostalgia, and re-contextualised in a post-apocalyptic setting where the eclectic combination of themes and forms are reconstituted to express the fears of post-electric America.

However, aside from the evolution of popular cultural expression, Washburn's play demonstrates the problem of cultural commodification as an ingrained mentality instilled by capitalist realism. Despite its evident flaws, the notion of culture as property is taken for granted in the post-electric America presented in the second act. As we hear through the discussion of the company performing seven years after the nuclear apocalypse, individual lines are bought to compile the scripts for shows, and are judged on how 'accurate' they are, despite the original material being lost (Washburn 63). Fake lines are made up by 'desperate' people, but are reportedly not used, though how Jenny, as the buyer, judges the accuracy of these lines is conspicuously undiscussed (Washburn 61). The restriction on who lines are bought from is reluctantly brought by up by Jenny as a consequence of a stranger's adamant claim that their line was used without permission, despite evidence that his line isn't used by the company (Washburn 62). These futile attempts to regulate fragments of popular culture as resources to be traded (despite their immateriality) shows the difference between the 'reality' proposed by capitalist realism – that cultural expression is and should be a commodity to be reassembled and sold on – and the 'traumatic void' of the 'Real', exposed by Jenny's anxieties, which reveals the inconsistencies of capitalist realist 'reality', as the notion of authentic value and of ownership is shown to be a flawed construct that cannot be substantiated (to apply Fishers reading of Lacan (*Capitalist Realism* 19)). Consequently the play uses post-electric America as a hypothetical future where the capabilities of capitalist realism to maintain total ideological supremacy through the power structures of institutions and cultural outlets is lost,

but where its principles are ingrained enough so that, to their own detriment, people instinctively follow them. The persistence of the capitalist realist 'reality' of culture as commodity is also evidenced by the fears of market competition expressed by Colleen. In reaction to Jenny's suggestion that the group no longer buy lines, Colleen states that if their rivals (Richard's Couch) 'keep buying lines they assemble superior shows. Our shows look shitty in comparison. We lose audience.[...]Until we're selling our repertoire to Richard's show by show' (Washburn 64). Washburn exposes how the commodification of the lines from the Simpsons and other snippets of popular culture causes a replication of unregulated market competition promoted by late capitalism, threatening the capability of the company to create performances. The inability of the company to reconcile the self-destructive mentality that culture is a finite resource exposes the how the ingrained attitudes of capitalist realism leaves people with limited scope to shape their world beyond the 'reality' of capitalist realism, causing them to impose the structural injustices of free-market capitalism on themselves. *Mr Burns* therefore verifies Mark Fisher's fears expressed at the start of this essay that end of capitalism has become impossible to conceive, even after the clean slate of a nuclear apocalypse.

The persistence of the structural inequality caused by capitalism becomes the crux of the play in its final moments, where the hope for a better society, as expressed in the final song sung by Bart and the chorus, is left in doubt. After Bart throws Mr Burns in to the river, a symbolic act of the post-electric generation's triumph in surviving the assault of the nuclear apocalypse, Bart sings a song that expresses a new hope for post-electric American society. After declaring his loss of everything he knows, Bart sings '[a]ll I have left is everything...[a]nd now I will do everything', as a '*SLOW ELECTRIC DAWN*' lights the stage (Washburn 94). The expression of a 'new and glittery' future of opportunity is soured by language that suggests a return to the capitalist opportunism that doesn't learn from the mistakes of the pre-electric generation. The new future expressed in Bart's song is

characterised, not by moderation and consciousness of the of the hubris and ignorance led to the apocalypse, but by the intent to remaster 'everything', denoting a return to the opportunistic individualism and totality of late capitalism, (ratified by Bart's use of 'I' rather than 'we'). The electric dawn, a symbol of hope, similarly foreshadows a return to the structures of capitalist realism, as the hope constitutes a return to electricity, the cause of the nuclear catastrophe. The repetition of the mistakes of late capitalism is symbolised in the final image on stage; a frantic Mr Burns pedalling on a bicycle attached to a treadmill, which malfunctions while the lights dim on stage (Washburn 95). This image, in contrast to the 'glorious' future proclaimed in the final line of the song (Washburn 95), insinuates how the post-electric future celebrated in the final song is doomed to rely on the nuclear power Burns represents (as evidenced in my third paragraph), with the breaking of the mechanism demonstrating the potential for the dangers of that power to once again cast America into darkness. Washburn's play therefore questions the feasibility of America to break from the totality of capitalist realism, as the ideal of unlimited opportunism which is at the heart of capitalist ideology is so entrenched in the thinking of America that it could foreseeably fail to break from its trends, even when these trends lead to the continual destruction of the environment. The defeat of past evils in the form of Burns and the triumph of Bart can therefore be seen as a mythology that enables post-electric America to avoid acknowledging of the Real implications of capitalism that are too hard to confront – that 'capital's 'need for a constantly expanding market', its 'growth fetish', mean that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability' (Fisher *Capitalist Realism* 19).

Washburn's play therefore uses the context of post-apocalyptic America to present the potential for popular culture to evolve into a medium that express the sentiments and yearnings of a community, though a future beyond the ideological supremacy of capitalist realism is never within reach.

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