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The Everage Talks Back: Barry Humphries as Dame Edna *vs* “the Cringe”

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If taste is considered not only an aesthetic criterion but primarily a social one, defined and imposed by a dominant class, group or culture, it follows that it must be understood as the result of a power struggle. However, the most efficient way to impose any ideological criterion is to present it as a “natural” one. Invoking the nature of things and people as an argument is more efficient than trying to impose a norm through authority or force, as this makes the source of violence identifiable and in so doing offers a means to put its authority to the test, and thus destabilises its discourse. This is why “taste” must not be presented as originating only in education but also in the individual’s intuition and sensitivity, thus confirming the “natural” cultural superiority of the leisured elites. The uneducated working class may consequently be characterised as lacking taste, but members of this class remain acceptable if they keep their place in the social hierarchy. They may even attract a certain aesthetic recognition if they act out their expected ungainliness with humble dignity. The lack of taste only becomes *bad* when class mobility threatens the established hierarchies, the beautiful and the good in the conservative Platonic tradition being defined in terms of permanence and order. The aesthetic pretensions of upstarts are therefore morally reprehensible in that they are potentially subversive, and ridicule is a way for the elites both to humiliate the social ambitions

of the lower classes and to reaffirm the threatened social order. In class-dominated Britain but also within the Empire, structured around the opposition between a dominant, meaning-giving centre and a subservient, albeit prosperous periphery, aesthetic judgement proved an efficient means for the sophisticated elites to maintain established hierarchies.

However, instead of being merely accidental and unwitting, bad taste can also be used deliberately, to create a dynamics within an overly static social organisation. This raises the question of the function of militant bad taste. Is it merely destined to provoke laughter by confronting the boundaries set by good taste, to create unease and disgust by asserting one's own illegitimacy, to claim recognition for one's illegitimacy before turning it into a new order, or an ambiguous complex of these goals?

For the exploration of these questions, the paradoxical figure of Dame Edna, housewife and superstar, who proudly describes herself as the world's longest running theatrical institution seems a case in point. For over fifty years now, the Australian comedian Barry Humphries has sporadically impersonated Dame Edna, the ageless housewife from Moonee Ponds, a fictitious suburb in Melbourne. Over the years, both on stage and in films, Humphries has impersonated many other characters, such as Lance Boyle, the brutal and corrupt unionist, Daryl Dalkeith the monstrous businessman, Erich Count Plasma, the ghoulish leader of a communist Transylvania, Sir Les Patterson, the blustering, oversexed, alcoholic cultural attaché, but also Sandy Stone, the dim and dull "ordinary" Australian. However, Edna with her overblown vulgarity, her enormous wisteria hairdo, over-painted face, outrageous frocks and gigantic glasses remains undeniably his best-known and best-loved creation.

Edna "Everage" (a send-up both of Australian vowels and of Australian egalitarianism) was conceived in the 1950s, when the rise of new nations in the wake of decolonisation put pressure on Australians to define their own national identity. This was made more difficult by what the Melbourne critic and social commentator A. A. Phillips in a very influential and controversial essay called "The Cultural Cringe"¹ defined as a pervasive, inferiority complex that induced Australians to

dismiss their own culture as being inferior to those of other countries, particularly to British culture. The “cringe” was of course largely a colonial legacy insofar as it consisted of the internalisation of the dominant culture’s contempt for all things provincial and peripheral. This was felt all the more strongly in Australia due to the former colony’s bizarre geographical position and its penitentiary origins. According to Phillips, this sense of cultural inferiority led to a rejection of intellectuals in general, specifically the local ones, sport being the only field in which ordinary people accepted that their nation was able to excel internationally.

Furthermore, this specific reaction of cultural self-censorship combined with a post-war trend, similar to the American one, which, as Cécile Whiting shows in her work *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture*², saw the rise of the middle classes and the placing of the domestic sphere at the heart of the sense of economic recovery and national identity during the Cold War, this being a means to prove the advantages of democracy and capitalism over the Soviet Union. The myth of economic egalitarianism, however, was possible only at the cost of ignoring all ways of life that deviated from the strict standard of the middle class norm. Many American cultural critics and social analysts in the 1950s and 1960s shared a disdain for middle class consumerism and conformism, which they associated primarily with the homemakers, that is to say middle class women. In an article entitled “The Plight of Our Culture: Industrialism and Class mobility”, the critic Clement Greenberg set out to defend high-art modernism against what he saw as the encroachment of middle class culture, stating that “middlebrow culture, because of the way in which it is produced, consumed, and transmitted, reinforces everything else in our present civilization that promotes standardization and inhibits idiosyncrasy, temperament, and strong-mindedness³.”

In Australia where the elitist field of intellectual achievement was in effect doubly curtailed, the highest social promotion possible in a suspiciously egalitarian and fiercely normative society was to be recognised as both respectable and ordinary. This was achieved by affecting a veneer of bourgeois niceness morally justified by a complete devotion to personal hygiene and home management. Australian Nobel Prize winner Patrick White was one of those who protested against this evolution of

the Australian society by famously denouncing what he called the “Great Australian Emptiness”. A close friend of Humphries’ in the 1950s, he scathingly described in *The Tree of Man* the encroaching spread (both physical and ideological) of Suburbia:

The brick homes were in possession alright. Deep purple, clinker blue, ox blood, and public lavatory. Here the rites of domesticity were practised, it had been forgotten why, but with passionate, regular orthodoxy, and once a sacrifice was offered up, by electrocution, by vacuum cleaner, on a hot morning, when the lantana hedges were smelling of cat⁴.

In the same way as the American critics, White gendered the power struggle between highbrow aesthetic culture and the consumer society, which, in another of his novels, he personified as a threateningly phallic suburban housewife:

As tea and contentment increased understanding of each other, as well as confidence in their own powers, it was only to be expected that two ladies of discretion and taste should produce their knives and try them for sharpness on weaker mortals. Seated above the world on springs and *petty point*, they could lift the lids and look right into the boxes in which moiled other men, crack open craniums as if they had been boiled eggs⁵.
(White 75)

Such aggressiveness of tone has consistently antagonized a majority of Australian critics who rejected White’s perspective as being “patrician”, if not downright “un-Australian”. By contrast, Humphries outrageous impersonation of the Australian housewife was generally very well received. Nevertheless, the study the critic John Lahr devoted to Barry Humphries does reveal that the comedian shared White’s horrified vision, although in a more ambivalent way as he insists on the fearsome seduction of suburbia that made it both necessary and difficult for him to break free:

It was important to emancipate oneself from this suburban milieu because it was so seductive and oppressive. You thought it was

inescapable. It was so disturbing. [...] Everything was in its place in Australia. [...] This was all part of the tyranny of niceness and order. The insulated world was comfortable and nice and nothing was really allowed to ruffle the surface. No debt, no poverty, no contamination. (Lahr 45-46)

Edna Everage epitomises this contradiction between superficial niceness and latent aggressiveness, which Humphries set out to caricature in order to extricate himself and his audience from its oppressive seductiveness. As he himself claims, he did not want to *overthrow* order, but “instinctively wanted to give it a bit of a *jolt*, so that people could *see* it.” (Lahr 21) This may sound relatively mild yet the kind of comedy Humphries resorted to was not mellow or complacent. It expressed a distinctive vindictiveness, a desire to shock and outrage, which reflected the sense of displacement and the identity anxieties inflicted upon him by the normative values of middle class respectability. In his precociously bookish youth, Humphries was laughed at and considered effeminate, and it was in high-art that he found a means to use bad taste against what he in turn condemned as his contemporaries’ philistinism.

He acted out what he calls his “dandiacal rage” initially just by turning into a sort of fifties’ Des Esseintes, or rather a parodic “Dez” Esseintes (Lahr 37) which enabled him to discover the release of eccentricity which he admired in so many artists. But then he became interested in Dadaism, which he described as “that thrilling poetic movement which had spilt with such fortuitous bad taste into the visual arts⁶.” He began to make a name for himself locally by staging outrageous cultural events in the Dadaist vein, devised to “ruffle the surface” of Australian complacency. Edna was the next step in his pointed provocation of his contemporaries. By impersonating her, he took on the effeminate persona his countrymen were projecting on him, but reverted it to reflect their own narrow-mindedness. As Humphries acknowledges, “[he] was rather puritanical in those early days, and moralistic. Anxious to *show* people. Edna was conceived as a character to remind Australians of their bigotry and all the things that [he] found

offensive. She was a rebuke. She was silly, bigoted, ignorant, self-satisfied Melbourne housewife." (Lahr 21).

To illustrate the intellectually castrating impact of middle class propriety, Edna took to parading on stage with cut gladioli, which she presented as the Australian national flower. After roughly throwing them out to the audience she would play up the sexual suggestiveness of the flowers by asking them to "tremble" the stems back at her as a kind of adoring salute.

At the beginning of her career, Edna actually wore the drab clothes and hats which were considered respectable, and almost no make-up. As a consequence, Humphries' obvious masculinity, his character's brutal familiarity, her garrulous racism and her disastrous affectations of gentility *did* outrage Australian audiences. Nevertheless, the close attention Humphries paid to the details of behaviour, turn of speech and system of reference of his character also initiated in his audiences a liberating breakthrough from the inhibiting cultural cringe. As Humphries himself explains, no comedian before him had actually tried "*as accurately as possible, without the use of jokes or even funny names, to discover something intrinsically funny*" in the way most people actually lived and spoke. Even though audiences realized that Edna's minute description of her Genoa velvet couch, the glass double doors with reindeers sand-blasted onto the panes, the duck-egg blue bedroom walls and the new chenille bedspread 'in a sort of pinky colouring' was derisive, they were delighted to be "served up suburban Melbourne" on stage⁷. As an architect writing in the "Small Homes Section" of the Melbourne Age remarked after seeing Edna on stage, "in a nation of avid homebuilders, it is now strange to think that our entertainers took so long to wake up to the inherent humor of our homes⁸." In the same way that White's highbrow novels revealed the sublime in the ordinary, Humphries' shows arguably contributed to emancipate his audiences from the effects of the cringe by showing that Australian ordinariness could be made into a subject and idiom of comedy. In a way, Humphries' Australian audiences were for the first time in on a kind of national private joke, and could enjoy laughing at themselves instead of passively submitting to the usual British sarcastic stereotypes of Australian provincialism.

Humphries, however, was not so much pleased as taken aback by his audiences' positive response to the character, which revealed the ambiguities latent in his use of bad taste as a satirical device. His audience, he claimed, recognized Edna, but "seemed to loathe her less than [he] did. It was the same with Sandy Stone. To [his] fury, people liked him; even as they laughed at him⁹." Moreover, Humphries had himself integrated the colonial need for recognition from British audiences felt bound, in 1959, to expatriate himself, and it is interesting to see in what ways this move changed the nature of his act.

Essentially, when he brought his character to Britain, the purpose of Edna shifted from the denunciation of peripheral cultural neurosis to the denunciation of the prejudices and actual shallowness of a dominant culture. Initially British audiences were not interested in watching shows about a caricature of an Australian housewife, probably because Australian provincialism was taken for granted by most spectators. However, when Humphries invented the oxymoronic concept of the housewife-superstar, his shows popularity began to increase. The rise of the sub-ordinary colonial housewife to stardom both flattered and debunked popular dreams of media celebrity.

On the one hand, in her shows, Edna insists on her ordinariness while flaunting her designer frocks and her jewels and gloating over the power her alleged fame has brought her. She is also able to avenge the frustrations of the lower classes by impersonating the tasteless parvenu whose only superiority is financial but who can afford to boast casually about having just bought up the whole of Stratford-upon-Avon, or having hung Munch's "Scream" in her bathroom. On the other hand, Edna highlights the shallowness of show business by upstaging all the backstage petty animosities (her sidekick Madge Alsop is thus made to bear the full force of her self-centredness, for instance) as well as the performer's contempt for the audience who is taken in by his hypocritical goodwill.

In a ironic confirmation of Humphries' denunciation of show-business, Dame Edna actually did accumulate what Bourdieu calls "social capital", as cultural as well as political celebrities began to flock to Edna's parodic talk-shows, where she contributed in increasing their media visibility while building up her own. As Lahr

puts it, "Dame Edna dethrones the seriousness of authority, but at the same time exploits that authority to make her fantasy into legend¹⁰." On these shows, Edna makes the most of her supposed provincialism by pretending to be ignorant of other people's fame and ritually sticking onto her celebrity guests (such as Sean Connery, Jeffrey Archer, Edward Heath or Germaine Greer) a large unsightly badge bearing their first name disrespectfully shortened, just in case she should forget their names. At the same time of course, the very fact that such famous people should tolerate being thus humiliated serves as a confirmation of her own importance in the world of the media.

More subtly, Dame Edna often wrong-foots her guests by putting them off their guard with her own tastelessness. In this way she allows them and the audience to feel superior and induces them to behave tastelessly in their turn, as when they laugh when she tells them naively that she is Australian (their laughter implying that they didn't need to be told), which in turn reflects upon their prejudiced attitude towards "colonials". Another example of this knack Humphries has of turning the tables on his guests can be found in the interview with Jeffrey Archer in the "Dame Edna Experience" series, in which Archer was asked whether he always took himself seriously or whether he was able to laugh at himself. At that, Archer launched into a couple of anecdotes in which he appeared in a ridiculous light to prove that he did possess the kind of self-deprecating humour usually associated with the elites who can afford to laugh at themselves because they know that their dignity will remain intact. In the second one, he told how, at a meeting "down in Essex", he was introduced by a mayor who asked the audience to welcome a speaker well known for his "debatable" qualities. Dame Edna joined in the audience's appreciative laughter before quipping: "Oh, he sound like a silly old working class person", thus rejecting Jeffrey Archer's claim to self-deprecating, aristocratic humour and commenting implicitly on his allegiance to conservative values and his implied contempt for working class ignorance.

Examples like this one seem to indicate that although the edge of Humphries' comedy changed when he moved from Australia to Britain, in essence it nevertheless remained the same insofar as it continued to embody subversively within a single

character the two conflicting forms of comedy, that of restrained aristocratic wit, and that of the kind of liberating laughter Bakhtin defined as “carnavalesque”.

This duality is of course best materialised and served by the recourse to transvestism, which physically inscribes the tension between highbrow and lowbrow comedy, allowing Humphries to shift constantly from sophisticated, reflexive wit to atrociously vulgar buffoonery in a fascinating balancing act. Transvestism, which was initially the most shocking element in his character actually meant that it was possible for Humphries to introduce ambiguity in his stage persona, enabling him alternately to merge and dissociate himself from the distasteful, and as Lahr puts it, to allow the audience both “to share and to excuse his exhilaration at bad taste and his aristocratic pleasure in giving offence¹¹”. Some of the most disturbing, Dada-like moments in the shows are when Edna’s cruelty and tastelessness seem to get out of hand, and she starts picking out old, fat, or in some way ill-favoured people. Then the audience laugh from the shock caused by such gratuitous and uninhibited malice, but also from the sheer relief at not being the one picked on, while at the same time being horrified at their own instinctive complicity in such uncivilised behaviour. On the other hand, some of the most enjoyable moments are when the guests are able to outwit Edna, sometimes managing to surprise and amuse Humphries himself beneath his mask. In this case, class violence is sublimated, as it were, into a battle of wits, and the opposition between “good” and “bad” taste no longer seems particularly relevant. This brings us to the root of Humphries’ specific brand of comedy: his shows seem to be as exhilarating for him as for his audience as he seems to thrive on the sense of danger and sublimated aggressiveness. As a sophisticated artist in lowbrow garb, he is acutely aware of the boundaries of taste he ambiguously confronts and transgresses while never lapsing into demagogic vulgarity.

To conclude, if one tries to interpret Humphries’ type of derision from a social and historical perspective, it is possible to consider that the bad taste Edna flaunts on stage, from being the mark of a social inferiority, becomes the sign of a successful revenge over the sense of alienation and colonial cringe. Humphries can afford to be

laughed at for he knows that his identity as an Australian cannot be subsumed under the ridiculous type the colonial situation has created. The fact that Humphries' identity is concealed beneath Edna's persona reinforces this interpretation of the illusion for the sexual inversion attributes devalued femininity to the superficial self while preserving the dignity of the actor's intrinsic maleness. For British audiences, the bad taste that the Australian housewife advertises as such serves superficially to confirm the superiority of British taste while at the same time revealing the actual irrelevance of such outmoded prejudices. From a generic rather than historic point-of-view however, looking into the role of and taste for transvestism, the success of Humphries' comedy which is also based on a fascination for inversion and the bizarre holds out bad taste not so much as a natural given (or rather lack) but as an entertainment which liberatingly, playfully inverts nature, thus provoking laughter rather than repulsion.

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NOTES

¹ A. A. Phillips, "The Cultural Cringe", first published in *Meanjin* in 1950 and republished in the magazine's seventieth birthday issue this year, which seems to prove its continued relevance in the opinion of the magazine's editors at least (*Meanjin*, n°69, vol 4, 2010).

² Cécile Whiting *A Taste for Pop: Pop Art, Gender and Consumer Culture*, Cambridge, CUP, 1997.

³ Greenberg quoted in Whiting, 566.

⁴ Patrick White, *The Tree of Man*, 394.

⁵ Patrick White, *Riders in the Chariot*, 75.

⁶ Humphries, quoted in Ian Britain, *Once an Australian*. Melbourne, OUP, 1997, 48.

⁷ Britain 48.

⁸ Britain 41.

⁹ Britain 44.

¹⁰ John Lahr, *Dame Edna Everage and the Rise of Western Civilisation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 15.

¹¹ Lahr 29.

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