

The Logic of the Paradox – Self-Inventing and Popular Culture in Nicola Barker’s *Clear*

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Abstract

*Nicola Barker’s Clear (2004) was inspired by David Blaine’s endurance stunt “Above the Below”, during which the illusionist fasted for forty-four days confined in a transparent box suspended above the Thames, starting on September 5, 2003. This article focuses on how the theme of self-fashioning through the texts of popular visual culture is explored in the novel and how Barker renders some of the central paradoxical principles that generate these texts’ meanings. It also argues that rather than being documentary fiction, *Clear* represents a novel of ideas because it dramatises some of the recent theories of postmodern popular culture and identity formation.*

Keywords: *identity, self-invention, self-fashioning, postmodern popular culture, visual culture, intertextuality, interculturality*

For meanwhile the aforementioned change in public interest had set in; it seemed to happen almost overnight; there may have been profound causes for it, but who was going to bother about that; at any rate the pampered hunger artist suddenly found himself deserted one fine day by the amusement-seekers, who went streaming past him to other more-favored attractions. (Franz Kafka, “A Hunger Artist”)

Nicola Barker is arguably one of the most distinctive, original and audacious narrative voices among the younger generation of contemporary British novelists. The work that made her name was her third novel, *Wide Open* (1998), which won the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2000 where it defeated works by much more acclaimed writers such as Toni Morrison, Ian McEwan and Phillip Roth. In their comments on the novel, the judges praised it as “word perfect, witty and ironic”, possessing a “manic energy and taut

eloquence worthy of a large, serious and global readership".¹ In 2003, *Granta* placed her on its list of Best Young British Novelists under forty. Barker's sixth novel, *Clear* (2004), was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize; her subsequent novel, *Darkmans* (2007), was shortlisted for this prize and won the 2008 Hawthornden Prize. Because of her interest in the grotesque, deranged and difficult she has been repeatedly compared to such authors as the young Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Saul Bellow.

The most defining aspect of Barker's writing is that her works are always peopled with characters somehow at odds with both society and their own place within it. In life as well as art, she is "instinctively drawn to the marginal, the outcast and the frankly unhinged" (Hickling), which is why her protagonists tend to be eccentrics, losers, outcasts, unsettled lost souls, deranged individuals, criminals; abusers as well as the abused. "Barker strives to be alternative, to champion whatever is unpopular or alternative" (Rustin). She explains her concern for the underdog by the paradoxical combination of their uncontrollable destruction and their unceasing struggle for self-preservation: "It fascinates me, seeing how people deal with tragedy or adversity. There's something beautiful about them. [...] I don't seek perfection in people or life. Struggle makes everything more explosive and brilliant. That's why I write difficult books" (Ramaswamy). Another characteristic feature of Barker's fiction is that her stories are full of many unlikely twists of fate which trigger a ripple effect of accidental encounters and bizarre conflicts through which the fates of the individual characters intertwine. This, in effect, makes them curiously close, yet at the same time insurmountably remote for readers. Her loners are willing to do anything to protect the fragile shell of their self – they lie, deceive, murder as well as care, protect and love.

Barker's fictional world is a largely heterogeneous one whose mundane gothicity defies rational interpretation. Entering it compels the reader "to almost certain confusion, definite disorientation, a hefty dismay and slew of words, ideas and images" (Clark). The charm of her stories consists in the absence of explanations, causes and motivations behind her character's acts, attitudes and utterances on the one hand, and the abundance of puzzlement, misconceptions and misunderstandings on the other. She exposes her readers to characters whose every single move is unpredictable and often inexplicable, as their thinking and impulses rarely overlap with the readers' own life experiences. These characters embody the ultimate otherness of another person and the consequent feeling of isolation in a society of virtual sociability and economic affluence. Her novels thus confidently render all of the (un)thinkable traumas, frustrations and pathologies that postmodern civilization has ever conceived.

Clear occupies a specific position within the corpus of Barker's work as it is, unlike the elaborately invented plots of her other novels, directly inspired by a real-life event. Barker refers to *Clear* as her "first truly 'realist' novel" (Thwaite) – in which realism is not systematically integrated with fantasy. On September 5, 2003, the 30-year-old American illusionist and endurance artist David Blaine entered a transparent plastic box suspended 30 feet above the south bank of the Thames, the area between City Hall and Tower Bridge, for a 44-day period of fasting on a mere 4.5 litres of water per day. "Above the Below", as it was called, immediately became the top media event of that time. The site was recorded by camera 24-hours-a-day by Sky TV and Blaine invited his film-maker friend Harmony Korine to make a documentary about the stunt. The reactions of the media and the public

were diverse and often inconsistent, ranging from praise and admiration to the utmost hostility and spitefulness. Newspapers reported that various objects such as eggs, vegetables and water bottles had been thrown at the illusionist and the police had to intervene when a man attempted to damage the water supply to the box. Barker, herself keen on the stunt, was so enraged by the incivility and hatred of the people gathered underneath Blaine's box that she decided to write a novel about the entire sensational event. The immediacy of the impulse was reflected in the very process of writing the novel – it took her only three months, during which she even interrupted her work on the ambitious *Darkmans*.

Even though the cast of characters Barker introduces in *Clear* is not as freakish as, for instance, in *Wide Open*, they are extraordinary and eccentric enough that the reader easily forgets the oddity of a multimillionaire starving himself almost to death on public display. Adair Graham MacKenny, the main protagonist and narrator of the story, is a 28-year-old fashion-obsessed civil servant, a smart-mouthed, but often also a too quick- and big-mouthed, narcissist who makes use of the chaos in the vicinity of Blaine's box to pick up girls. He suffers from an inferiority complex because of his hyper-successful, sharp-witted, good-looking, multi-talented Ghanaian radical intellectual flatmate Solomon Tuesday Kwashi. Adair's life changes when he encounters the enigmatic Aphra Behn, a migraine sufferer with a fetish for extravagant second-hand shoes who comes to watch the illusionist sleep at night, with a plastic bag of Tupperware always in her hand and who, due to her exquisite sense of smell, used to work as a perfumery sniffer. And then there is Hilary, a sacked clerk turned fortune teller, or Brandy Layland, the dying knowledge-thirsty Australian wine tycoon and Aphra's husband. Against the background of Blaine's stunt, Barker knots together the fates of all these individuals in "a wonderfully sharp, sassy and knowing comedy of metropolitan manners" (Tonkin).

On her motivation for the novel Barker says: "[I]t's so much a book about London and her prejudices, at that very particular moment in time. [...] In many respects it's a savage attack on the shortcomings of the English race, but I have a nagging suspicion that our shortcomings are pretty much universal" (HarperCollins). *Clear* is a novel of ideas but is also Barker's most comic novel as well. Even though it originated as a reaction to a specific cultural phenomenon, it addresses an entire spectrum of burning issues and idiosyncrasies of contemporary urban life, including the omnipresent feeling of alienation inside a crowd, the fragility and instability of one's identity, the power of the media and commercial culture, the effects of hyper-consumerism and the consequences of the obsession with appearances, all of which make its scope much more universal than many critics have been willing to admit. The aim of this article is to explore how Barker treats the theme of modern city dwellers' self-fashioning, the continuous re-inventing of their identity together with the role popular culture can play in this process.

The conceit/deceit of self-invention

Self-invention and self-fashioning shape the production of every individual's identity. The split between the public and the private side of a persona has been reflected in social encounters since the birth of modernity and has grown markedly apparent with the rapid development of visual media, advertising and entertainment industries during the twentieth century. Every act of self-invention is ambiguous and paradoxical in many respects. Its

playfulness gives space to imagination and creativity and further reinforces the anonymity and impersonality of most of our social encounters. Assuming a made-up identity thus might represent an alluring game containing an element of irresponsibility, adventure and excitement. However, the awareness that everyone is inventing themselves makes us sceptical concerning the reliability of our interpretation of what we see and hear, and, in consequence, immune to any emotional content or manifestation, no matter how convincing it may seem. The most striking paradox consists in the irresolvable conflict between our desire to be original and distinctively unique and the simultaneous necessity to maintain a coherent, reliable and authentic self – as this is what assumptions of trust and reciprocity in a functioning society rest on.

Identity is therefore a shifting and shapeable category, a kind of discursively produced commodity designed by diverse, sometimes contradictory, narratives. Thinkers such as Erving Goffman, Roland Barthes and Stephen Greenblatt acknowledge society not as an expression of inherent human drives or remote external forces, but as a construct based on our capacity to act out and invent ourselves. Such a construct, however, is prone to instability because regardless of how convincing our self-conscious performance might appear, we cannot control how others will see us. Even the most carefully prescribed rituals are thus marked by our omnipresent insecurity and fear of failure and embarrassment, the malicious foundations of contemporary social life.² Also, as a majority of our daily encounters are derived from various social hierarchies, our self-enacted image has to equip us for these negotiations of inequalities and an imbalance of power, and so we imagine ourselves in the tension between the internal and the external, the regulations of the imposed social codes and our sense of what our personality really is. The frustrations connected with self-inventing derive from the circular logic that our bifurcated self is compelled to follow: self-identity is a pliant discursive practice embedded in cultural and linguistic conventions, but the key to these conventions is to act as if a stable personal identity existed, transcending the moment (Finkelstein 116).

Contemporary popular consumer culture does its best to present and disguise the process of self-fashioning as an ultimately pleasant and rewarding one by appealing to the participant's latent narcissistic desires: "Some of the pleasures of the moment rest with seeing ourselves mirrored in the actions of others and by being flattered by them. There is a sense of authority and pleasure to be extracted from such moments and it is easy to conclude from these instances that personal identity is a conceit rather than deceit" (Finkelstein 68). The mass media have added a new, virtual dimension to our everyday life and the immediacy of this scopic hyperreality has caused identity to collapse into and be repeatedly reconstructed from fragmentary visual signs and images.³ Like most manifestations of post-technological, cybernetic civilization, media-infused popular culture is ultimately ambivalent in its production of meanings. On the one hand, it surfeits its consumers with superficial voyeuristic pleasures in a hyperreal universe of signs without referents, in which vision is presented as a trustworthy source of knowledge. On the other hand, popular culture can be seen as a functioning instrument and guide for forming identity that prepares us for the realities of social life. As these are rarely under our complete control, and as lies and deceit condition the unwritten rules of sociality, popular culture anticipates this tendency by unfolding the multiplicity of realities, the manifold layers of social life. It is understandable to blame popular culture for distracting people from more serious and

higher forms of art, but it is also legitimate to appreciate it for making them aware of the complexity and diversity of modern social life. “Popular culture is not simply diversionary; it circulates ideas and brings complex questions to our attention” (Finkelstein 24), namely those addressing subjectivity and identity.

John Fiske emphasises the necessity of understanding popular culture as a process which produces meanings only in social and intercultural relations. “The meanings of popular culture exist only in their circulation, not in their texts; the texts, which are crucial in this process, need to be understood not for and by themselves but in their interrelationships with other texts and with social life, for that is how their circulation is ensured” (Fiske, *Reading* 3). The meanings of popular culture are context-based and to a large extent completed by the consumers, which can only be done when these meanings have some relevance to their everyday life. Popular culture is thus pre-fabricated by the culture industries but practically realised by people. The texts of popular culture are always incomplete, contradictory, ephemeral and unstable, with only potential relevance to the social situation of the reader, who can actualise it by filling the texts’ gaps with his or her own expectations and experience. Popular readings are therefore often undisciplined, selective, episodic and spasmodic, treating the text “with profound disrespect. [...] Popular texts must offer not just a plurality of meanings, but a plurality of ways of reading, of modes of consumption” (Fiske, *Understanding* 144-5). The very inconsistency and lack of literality of popular texts effectively generate a multiplicity of meanings, representing one of the central paradoxes at the foundations of popular culture.

Nowhere else does self-invention and self-fashioning assume so many forms and thrive under so many influences as in the bustling contemporary city, where encounters with strangers compose the majority of daily social interactions. City life is the most dominated by rules of politeness, self-control and the conventions of public domain manners. The city is also the most natural milieu where the texts of popular culture operate. City dwellers are permanently caught in the lines of force of popular culture production, meaning that the realisation of one’s self “slips into the construction of an image, a style, a series of theatrical gestures. [...] The individual constructs her or himself as the object of street art, as a public icon: the body becomes the canvas of changing urban styles” (Chambers 11). In this process, the signifiers devised by the popular culture industries are released from their original context and are open to the consumer to attribute new referents to them; thus they exert some degree of control over the cultural production of meaning. One of the effects is that inhabitants tend to perceive their city as imagined rather than seen, employing the re-enchanting prism of nostalgia, desire and fantasy instead of a solely rationalist one.⁴ Michel de Certeau understands the city as a discursive network, as a huge and immensely dense text, a system consisting of spatial practices for disciplining meaning and life. These disciplinary mechanisms are, however, never entirely successful: by reading/inhabiting them, city dwellers turn them into freed signs which they infuse with fresh meanings.⁵ Popular culture can thus be understood as, simultaneously, the weaponry with, and a battlefield on which, an incessant struggle for gaining control over the production of meanings and identities is led.

And he was Adair Graham MacKenny

Adair Graham MacKenny, consciously or not, embodies all the qualities and character traits of a pop cultural consumer – vanity, self-centeredness, self-delusion and self-importance. All these, together with his belief that they can be successfully disguised during short-term encounters with strangers, make him an exemplary case of a person whose public self has been transformed into a continuous series of acts of self-inventing and self-fashioning. His very narrative voice is, in fact, a kind of verbal recording of his capacity for the permanent reshaping and readapting of his identity. Therefore, it is by no means surprising that the self-image Adair creates by his narration is anything but a consistent and credible one. “I don’t make the rules, okay? I’m just a dispassionate observer of the Human Animal” (2), he says at the beginning of the story – a phrase that could hardly be further from reality as his narration is very emotive if not affected, consisting prevailingly of his feelings, judgements, speculations, arguments, moralizations, protestations and self-excuses. His second peremptory statement about himself, “I have an agenda. You really need to know that. I mean all this isn’t just *arbitrary*” (12, emphasis in original)⁶, also departs from truth as it is arbitrariness that crucially conditions his multiple identities, which are always flexible enough to suit the incidental and unpredictable stimuli of London life. As proof, Adair gives the example of his father, “fundamentally a very genial, affable, easy-going creature” (12), who only a few lines later turns out to be a racist, a petty-bourgeois xenophobe, whose “only” flaw is his passionate hatred for illusionists because of his childhood traumatic disappointment with an illusionist. This, however, appears to be sufficient reason for Adair to hate all magicians and illusionists too. “And it isn’t (no it *isn’t*) just opportunism. It’s so much more than that. It’s a moral crusade. It’s righting the wrong. It’s fighting the good fight – *sniff!* – for my trusty old *dad*” (18), a justification absurd enough even without the clichéd wording and pathetic nostalgia.

Lying and deception determine the construction of Adair’s public self and he is well aware of the fact, saying that “hyperbole” is his middle name (53). Arbitrary though the stimuli of the city streets are, when an opportunity occurs he is promptly able to become very systematic and focused in his identity scheming. When the publicity around Blaine’s stunt daily brings numerous spectators to a spot within easy reach of his office, he creates a taxonomy of the girls in the crowd according to their attitude to the illusionist, including a suitable strategy of approaching and picking them up. He labels his “project” “Above the Pillow”, indicating thus the playfulness and noncommittal nature of his enterprise. In terms of Zygmunt Bauman’s typology of postmodern identity patterns, Adair represents an effective combination of the stroller and the player⁷: at first, hidden in the anonymity of the crowded street, he observes and inspects the people around him, ingeniously projecting their characters, feeling as if he were a powerful director of their fates in order to subsequently transform himself into a self-confident, pragmatic player who takes life as a slightly, yet not very, risky game in which other people are pieces and social interaction is a move depending on a random event such as a roll of the dice. And so when Aphra disrupts his picking-up-girls game by calling him a pimp, he acts out of character, stricken with such confusion that his elaborately constructed identity shatters like a house of cards: “So what do I do? Avoid? Approach? Mollify? Threaten? Be cute? Make a joke? Get

sarcastic?” (66). Yet, symptomatically, he feels not so much offended as fearful that he might lose the his public self, his “street credibility” (77).

Adair is a ridiculously pitiable person, and Barker treats him deservedly as such by making him childishly keen on Jack Schaefer’s classic western novel *Shane*. He sees himself in its hero so much that he cherishes an idealised image of himself as a mysterious stranger whose tranquility and evenness make his every single gesture dangerously appealing and teeming with meanings. He also admires Schaefer’s construction of the character which places him alongside the novel’s inexperienced child narrator. Adair’s “I am putty – literally *putty* – in Schaefer’s hands. [...] I just love this feeling. I do. To be manipulated, to be led, to be *played*, and so artfully” (5) more than echoes little Bob’s reaction when Shane’s eyes first meet his: “[h]is glance hit me, dismissed me, flicked over our place” (Schaefer 3). Barker drives the irony even further by having her narrator uncritically adore Schaefer’s economical, emotionless, straightforward style, his “huge balls” and “no-frills writing at its *very best*” (1, 4), while his own narration is the exact opposite – affective, repetitive and periphrastic (“[h]arping’s my trademark”, 3). The style is a metaphor of his identity: while Shane’s is assumed to be inherent, Adair’s must be repeatedly invented, re-defined and verbalised, and as such is externally shaped and therefore rather ephemeral. His love for the dark mysterious gunman can be taken as a subconscious wishful longing for a lasting, coherent self.

The magic of the popular

Clear shares Fiske’s theory concerning the formation of meaning in texts of popular culture. Blaine’s endurance stunt is evidence that the illusionist is perfectly aware of the mechanics of not only the production and consumption of popular culture, but also of its modes of signification. The essential principle of his performance is to satisfy the scopic regime of postmodern culture by presenting his audience with a spectacle based on the amalgam of “passivity and raw emotion” (54). By this combination he seemingly reduces his stunt, and himself along with it, into a simple gesture, a transparent sign deprived of referents to anything outside itself. This proves unsatisfactory for most of the spectators as it stirs them to get to know more about what so “inexplicably” attracts them, and they eventually succumb to the urge to find out information, reveal connections and attribute a meaningful explanation to the act. This, however, forces them to enter the machinery of Blaine’s popular culture industry – his biography, website, press interviews and public statements, all the places where he, as if by pure coincidence, hints at diverse cultural, religious and historical sources of inspiration and potential frameworks of interpretation of his performances, such as his Jewishness, implied Christian symbolism or the writing of Franz Kafka and Primo Levi.

It is this deliberate void between the surface effect and reality that invites people to fill in and thus consume the popular culture text of David Blaine. As Jalisa, the educated and cultured ex-girlfriend of Adair’s flatmate, concisely observes, “[t]he fact is that it’s this playful *gap* which Blaine is most interested in. It’s what he exploits. It’s where his power resides. His strength, as a performer, lies in this confusion. But he calls it ‘mystery’ [...] What *lives* in that gap between appearance and fact? You can call me cynical, but I’m not entirely convinced that it’s necessarily a *good* thing...” (294–5). What resides in

the gap are the latent mechanisms of meaning production of popular culture in which, as Fiske demonstrates, the consumers participate, if only in an undisciplined, selective manner of reading. Jalisa's worries are understandable from the very ambivalent character of popular culture – although people are not mere passive recipients of ready-made meanings imposed on them by the popular culture industries, it is very doubtful whether all these consumers would harbour meanings and intentions without potentially harmful consequences for other people. No text of popular culture is neutral as it is always embedded in wider social and discursive contexts that allow it to be infused preferentially with some meanings rather than others.

Through the multifarious cast of her characters, Barker opens her narrative game of readings of the “blank” Blaine text. Aphra is the only one who does not read it in a broader social and cultural context and sees Blaine’s night-time ease and motionlessness as the quintessence of humanity, being exposed to which brings an effect that transcends the mundaneness of the everyday, finding in him what she misses most in her own life – equanimity. Barker mischievously involves the intellectual Solomon in her game by making him attracted by the Blaine spectacle and having him propose a misled interpretation. Solomon projects his ethnic radicalism onto Blaine and reads the stunt as an expression emphasising the illusionist’s blackness (imprisoned symbolically in a white transparent box), the heart of his argument being that only people of colour are truly able to embrace and understand a spectacle. Jalisa, on the other hand, though she maintains a slightly disparaging detachment claiming that Blaine has been “completely neglecting to research into the likely consequences of the things he’s doing” (88), offers a more feasible interpretation – that he aspires to impress Korine and to create serious art. For her, the Blaine text is a cry directed elsewhere than to its readers/spectators: it is a static sign, and possibly an artifact, pointing mainly to itself/the performer, and as such cannot be judged in terms of like or dislike: “You don’t get angry with the sign itself, or love the sign. That’d be kinda inappropriate” (90). What she appears to disregard at this point is that the texts of popular culture can easily be appropriated by anyone, no matter whom their originators intended them for, just as appealing only to underground and avant-garde artists would hardly have made Blaine a multimillionaire.

Ironically, the character whose reading of Blaine is most complex and challenging is the always underrated and non-assertive Bly. She is the first to understand the significance of the non-determinedness for the free play of signifiers of meaning of a popular culture text, and she resolutely dismisses Adair’s attempts to find out the truth about Blaine’s social, cultural and religious background: “But does it really matter *what* Blaine’s background is? [...] Surely the important thing is what he chooses – consciously or otherwise – to ‘represent’, and how people respond to it” (209). Any ambitious text of global popular culture must, from its very essence, offer as universal and all-comprising a ground for identification as possible, one which reflects the collective human experience. Bly points out to this when identifying the signs of suffering and mystery as trademarks of Blaine’s stunts: “Fortunately (for him) *all* religions, all nationalities, all cultures can relate to those things in some way or other. His work has a universal application. It’s not about any particular *denomination*, but about the trials of humanity” (210). Texts of popular culture are therefore subversive not in any particular message they formulate, but in the limitless number of possible readings by which the consumers can complete their meaning. As these

readings tend to be selective, eclectic and disparate manifestations of the readers' self-projections, they can subvert the conventions and presuppositions of the homogeneously normative society, most frequently in the form of a release of negative emotions and frustrations, as Bly explains to Adair: "[Blaine]'s a blank canvas. He's transparent. He's *clear*. So when people look up at him they don't hate what *he* is. They project everything they're feeling on to him. [...] And it works exactly the same way for the positive people. [...] He's like a mirror in which people can see the very best and the very *worst* of themselves. That's the simple genius of what he's doing. That's the *magic*" (311). Blaine's success (and any success of popular culture in general) consists in his (its) ability to produce texts that invite the consumers to read them by simultaneously reading them back in order to satisfy their narcissist desires.

The most exemplary case of a "laboratory rat" left exposed to a perpetual dosing of Blaine popular culture is Adair – who, through Barker's ironic treatment, undergoes a noticeable evolution from a frustrated and insecure proto-metrosexual self-fashioner to a self-consciously complacent consumer of popular texts. His initial frustration, bordering on hatred for the illusionist, is not caused by his inability to understand the mechanics of the stunt's production of meaning but rather by his inability to assume an unequivocal stance towards it. Like Jalisa or Bly, Adair is capable of a probing sociological and psychological analysis of different attitudes people adopt toward Blaine, as for instance when he explains that Blaine's success rests in his ability to cater to the increasing hunger for firm points in the "liquid" or "runaway"⁷⁸ postmodern world of relativised values and transient certainties: "Seems like the need for real 'truth' [...] has – at some weird level – become almost a kind of modern mania. Perhaps without even realising, this loopy illusionist has tapped into something. Something big. A fury. A disillusionment. A *post-disillusionment* (almost). He personifies this sour mood, this sense of all pervasive *bafflement*" (62). However, he himself is a victim of this need for finding out "the truth", and consequently prey to the Blaine text when his contradictory feelings evoked by the absence of any apparent meaning to the stunt drive him to complete it from other sources.

From the perspective of Barker's toying with the character of Adair, *Clear* follows Finkelstein's persuasion that texts in popular culture, rather than copying everyday life, devise a multiplicity of alternative realities by which they also circulate complex ideas and lay them before the consumers. Thanks to the publicity Blaine and his PR people make around "Above the Below", Adair is drawn into wider textual and cultural contexts, from popular to serious ones. He visits numerous related websites, including the spiteful "wakedavid.com" designed to organise people who plan to keep the illusionist awake at night in order to make his endurance more difficult. He also reads Blaine's autobiographical reference book to illusionism and street magic, *Mysterious Stranger: A Book of Magic* (2002), an excellent example of well-considered self-invention, where he strives to collect the cleverly scattered, and mostly further unexplained, hints of why Blaine does what he does. Barker confronts her protagonist with his favourite type of a hero – a mysterious dark stranger – but unlike his beloved Shane this one is fashioned in a much less straightforward and lucid manner. At first Adair explores the Christian trajectory of the Blaine discourse, derived from the feeble parallels with the trials of Jesus in the wilderness, but supported by the image of a tattoo of Salvador Dali's "Christ of Saint John of the Cross" which covers his back. Then the indicia from the text set him off for the Jewish

trajectory on which he learns about the inspiration from Harry Houdini, himself the son of a rabbi, discovers the similarities between the details of “Above the Below” and Kafka’s famous short story “A Hunger Artist” (1922), and even reads Primo Levi’s autobiographical account of his one-year imprisonment in the Auschwitz concentration camp, *If This Is a Man* (1947), prompted by Blaine’s forearm tattoo of the identical digits Levi was given in Auschwitz. Adair credulously falls for this interpretation not only because it fills the meaning void behind Blaine’s stunt, but because it also appears to compose a coherent, and therefore trustworthy, narrative. When Jalisa points to the incongruity between the Christian and Jewish readings of the Blaine text, he shows how desperately reliant he is on a consequential explication: “He’s a Jew! [...] Because that’s what makes *sense*. That’s how it all adds up. Because I *like* him Jewish. I understand him better as a Jew, *and* the hostility he’s generating” (197). Barker thus demonstrates another paradox around the texts of popular culture: they bring complex ideas and questions to their readers’ attention, but they do not equip these consumers with sufficient instruments to understand them and make sensible connections between them. As their readings are episodic and random, so are their interpretations – set in contexts yet fundamentally de-contextualised, lured by a convenient story disguised as an inherent truth.

Postmodern self-fashioning

There are various systems of public signification that shape and determine the processes of socialising as these are firmly embedded in the discourses and practices that are produced by the systems. As a result, self-fashioning reflects extrinsic social and cultural norms, rules and conventions and blurs the borderline between one’s personality and the imposed demands of the social environment. In modern societies, self-fashioning “is linked to manners or demeanor, particularly of the elite; it may suggest hypocrisy or deception, an adherence to mere outward ceremony; it suggests representation of one’s nature or intention in speech and action” (Greenblatt 3), and, as far as literature and other cultural texts are concerned, “self-fashioning derives its interest precisely from the fact that it functions without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life. It invariably crosses the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one’s own identity, the experience of being molded by forces outside one’s control, the attempt to fashion other selves” (Greenblatt 3). Cultural production, especially its popular forms, represents one of the most influential systems of public signification in contemporary hyper-consumerist Western urban civilizations as it incessantly fabricates new patterns for identification, from fashion items to cyberspace identities, which are presented as a seamless extension of a consumer’s self.

In his study of the interplay between culture and individual identity in Tudor England, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), Stephen Greenblatt lists a set of governing principles common to most instances of self-fashioning. Even though Greenblatt formulates them specifically to explore the Renaissance re-inventions of selfhood, almost all of them can be easily adapted to help elucidate the mechanics of self-fashioning in contemporary visual culture. For the purpose of this argument, we can note the most crucial ones: self-fashioning involves submission to some power or authority outside the self; self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile; the alien is

perceived by the authority either as that which is unformed or chaotic, lacking order, or that which is false or negative, parodying the order, and consequently the alien is always constructed as a distorted image of the authority; when one authority or alien is destroyed, another takes its place; if both the authority and the alien are located outside the self, both submission and destruction are always already internalised; self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language; the power generated to attack the alien in the name of the authority is produced in excess and threatens and undermines the authority it sets out to defend (Greenblatt 8–9). What makes it partly problematic to apply these generalised principles to the conditions of (post)modernity is the absence of any manifest absolute authority in the globalised world, be it geopolitical or institutional.

Having been daily affected by crisis and the gradual breakdown of traditional power authorities such as the state, the Church and the workplace, postmodern people have learnt to adopt the politics of the personal in which loyalty to oneself has gained primacy over other bonds and responsibilities, as in many cases it has remained the only long-term obligation they are willing to accept. If someone has benefited from this widespread distrust of political, religious and social institutions, then it is the media and popular culture industries, which have readily and remorselessly taken over the role of moral arbiters and monopolised the formation, validation and enactment of ethical and aesthetic norms and values. The ephemeral and temporal character of the products of media and popular culture means that flexible self-fashioning has become a necessity; one of the vital conditions of living. Such self-fashioning is not only incited by the popular culture industries but also, as a specific instance of consumption, helps perpetuate them. In order to keep this circular process continuously going, popular culture needs to provide its consumers with the essential conditions for self-fashioning. This leads to another paradox of popular culture – it acts as the authority but simultaneously fabricates the alien.

In *Clear*, Barker demonstrates how skillfully David Blaine exploits this paradoxical principle behind the texts of popular culture – through his “Above the Below” stunt and the publicity around it he offers his (both admiring and hating) audience a range of opportunities for self-fashioning. On the one hand, Blaine presents himself as a knowing authority, a talented magician, illusionist and entertainer who is rich and successful yet remains friendly, humble and somehow clumsy in dealing with the public and the impacts of his popularity, a mysterious person whose performances speak about the limits and potentialities of humanity and thus invite identification. On the other hand, he is not afraid to provoke and exasperate the public by challenging the customary routines of Western lifestyle. Adair articulates this irritation precisely: “What makes *us* so angry (we puffed-up, sensitive, Western *ticks*) is seeing all the aspirations of capitalism degraded by the man who has pretty much everything (this young, handsome, charming, multi-milliionaire). He has it all – everything we yearn for – and yet he casts it casually, haughtily – *publicly* – aside... Well, for the princely sum of five million dollars... The ultimate Capitalist gesture of *Anti-Capitalism*. No wonder we’re so pissed off” (143–4). Blaine thus simultaneously represents both an authority for identification and the alien, strange or even parodic violation of the values that enabled his authority to come into being. Once the authority and the alien are produced and circulated by processes external to the consumers’ self and therefore beyond their control, the imposed texts are naturally subjected to the recipients’ inherent tendencies to either submit to them or attack them, depending on how relevant

to their everyday experience they find them. Blaine's endurance thus has its admirers and haters, the insiders and outsiders, the indifferent as well as those who are still in the process of self-fashioning themselves into one of these categories. The novel also shows that self-fashioning is always carried out in language – although Blaine's stunt seems to be a wordless gesture, it is in fact aided discursively by numerous texts and intertextual references; Adair reads these texts in order to “grasp” the stunt and establish his position in this matter; the haters and critics verbalise their feelings in various places, such as the internet or newspapers.

It is also logical that one alien or public enemy cannot function forever, and must be precisely temporally defined in order not to tire the short attention span of popular culture consumers, but also to grant them the prospect of the act's imposing completion. And so Blaine's starvation ends at a given date and time, accompanied with a spectacular show of intense emotions. When Adair is crossing Tower Bridge the day after, he nostalgically notes that “there's just this huge hole in the sky” (344), becoming a victim to popular culture's grand deception about each of its texts' authenticity and irretrievability, despairing that the hole will never be filled again. Greenblatt's last condition of self-fashioning is very specific under the above mentioned circumstances: as popular culture deliberately produces both the allied norms to be assumed and the enemy alien to be attacked, the energy generated for this attack might undermine the norms the alien ostensibly challenges. The underlying logic of the circle in popular culture, however, is in operation here yet in another paradox: popular culture updates and thus perpetuates itself by the revitalising process of selective self-destruction – the authority which proves outdated or difficult to accept must be removed. The polymorphism and plasticity of the media and popular culture industries assure that the undermined authority, which was originally tailored as a temporary authority anyway, will be immediately replaced by another one. “Above the Below” will for some time sustain its impact by nourishing people's nostalgia, but as soon as it becomes commercially exhausted, a new form of authority must take its place. *Clear* renders this defining contradiction of popular culture: subverting itself as a necessary condition for its successful functioning.

Transparent obscurity

Nicola Barker is a writer sincerely interested in the modes of operation of popular culture industries and the distinct ways in which their texts generate meanings. She admits to being fascinated by various reality shows as extreme instances of self-inventing: “I'm fascinated by people, and the ways they present/re-invent themselves” (Thwaite), and is well aware of the importance of the signifying gap between appearance and fact where the consumer completes the text's meaning by finding relevance between one's own experience and the seemingly free-floating textual and cultural signifiers it offers. “The most powerful forces (creatively/commercially/artistically) in modern culture tend to achieve that power by employing a whole range of religious/transgressive/historical signifiers” (HarperCollins). Barker also shows that even though the texts of popular culture (and the self-fashioning they inspire) do invite subversive readings (and practices), these seldom break free of the control of the mechanisms that actually initiated them. Popular culture, and the texts it produces, functions according to a circular logic which is paradoxical⁹,

inherently contradictory and inconsistent, and so are the acts of self-fashioning and the fashioned identities it incites – stressful yet exciting, irksome yet rewarding. Barker, like Finkelstein, believes that the various identity patterns people form and assume in this process prove beneficial rather than harmful as they help them cope better with the multiple realities and ever-changing demands of the hyperreality of contemporary city life.

A very distinctive feature of Barker's novel is its narrative voice, a “quickfire patter of gags, allusions and one-liners” (Tonkin), a “sardonic, snappy, down-and-dirty urban patois” whose energy and rhythm “reflect the cacophony of urban life” (Bedell). *Clear* not only dramatises some principles of popular consumer culture but does so in the very language this culture speaks – the language of advertising: it is exuberant, inconsistent, tautological, periphrastic, superficially allusive, repeatedly stressing its selected aspects. Naturally, it can be distracting, ridiculous or even irritating, but it captures the spirit of popular culture more authentically than any detached (meta-)commentary. Some critics considered *Clear* too much tied to one concrete pop cultural event, claiming that it had nothing more to offer than what had already been said about it in the media.¹⁰ This perspective, however, is simplistic because it ignores the novel's complex and universal layers of meaning reaching far beyond Blaine's September 2003 stunt, which enable one to read it as a playful yet thoughtful contemplation on the texture of the cultural and social condition of postmodern urban civilization. Barker's fictional world of popular culture and self-fashioning is a consistently deceptive and spurious one, disguising the visible as the real, but all the more enticing to explore. *Clear* is ironically subtitled “a transparent novel” and its true delight is to be found in allowing its readers to disclose whatever its transparency might conceal.

Notes

^{1.} All of the judges' comments can be found on the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award website: <<http://www.impacdublinaward.ie/judges2000.htm>>.

^{2.} Finkelstein refers particularly to Goffman's *Strategic Interaction* (1970), Barthes's *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) and Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004).

^{3.} In his introduction to *Visual Culture*, “The Centrality of the Eye in Western Culture”, Chris Jenks notes that Western thinking is guided by a visual paradigm despite the paradox that besets any social theory of visuality: on the one hand, vision is given priority among other senses as wholly autonomous, free and pure, but, on the other hand, visual symbols are experienced as mundane and embedded, and, consequently, their interpretation is regarded as contingent.

^{4.} James Donald explores this idea in “The City, the Cinema: Modern Spaces” (in *Visual Culture*), comparing the distinct imaginable cities as rendered in selected modernist and postmodernist cinematographic representations.

^{5.} See de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Part III: “Spatial Practices”.

^{6.} Barker uses italics repeatedly as a part of her narrator's unique voice – all the italicised words in my quotations from the novel are in the original.

^{7.} Bauman distinguishes two more identity patterns, *the tourist* and *the vagabond*, which, together with those of *the stroller* and *the player*, compose the personality of a postmodern person.

For further analysis of these metaphors see Bauman's *Life in Fragments. Essays in Postmodern Morality* (1995).

⁸. These are terms proposed by Zygmunt Bauman and Anthony Giddens to characterise the ultimate elusiveness of late modernity/postmodernity – see *Liquid Modernity* (2000) and *Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives* (1999).

⁹. An in-depth study of the paradoxical nature of contemporary Western hyper-consumer society can be found in Gilles Lipovetsky's *Le bonheur paradoxal (Paradoxical Happiness*, 2006).

¹⁰. For instance Alfred Hickling's "Box of tricks" in *The Guardian* or Natasha Tripney's review on readysteadybook.com.

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