

Published in *Mousse Magazine* 27, February 2011: 160-165.

Maeve Connolly

Staging Television: James Coleman's *So Different...and Yet*

Perhaps indeed since 1975 – the date at which Coleman created *Clara and Dario* and later the work in progress *Kojak and Zamora*, 1977-(), inaugurating an aesthetic informed by the media – the television can be seen in the background of James Coleman's work as one of the essential targets of his oeuvre, even as the world, in the media age which renders reality and fiction permeable to each other and increasingly undifferentiated, begins to appear fundamentally theatrical.¹

Jean-Christophe Royoux's essay 'Expanded Spectatorship: Narrative Strategies in the Work of James Coleman' appears in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *James Coleman* at Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona (October 28, 1999 – January 9, 2000). The essay includes a short discussion of the video installation *So Different...and Yet*, 1980, which is explicitly concerned with televisual form but Royoux also considers a number of works that are rarely seen or still in progress. This latter category includes *Kojak and Zamora*, the raw material for which concerns a young Puerto Rican, Zamora, who was convicted for the murder of a woman. His trial was one of the first to receive live TV coverage and it focused on the 'unhealthy influence' of the (then extremely popular) TV series *Kojak*.²

Royoux's approach raises a number of interesting questions concerning the historical development of both Coleman's practice and television, the implications of which I wish to explore further. At the outset of his essay, Royoux states that he seeks to understand what he describes '*the form* of the historical development of Coleman's work.'³ He explicitly rejects any chronological reading of Coleman's oeuvre, arguing that instead that it constitutes an 'incessant reprise and reformulation' – and a radical expression – of the rupture produced in contemporary art with minimalism, a rupture that established 'an ongoing present'⁴ for contemporary art. He does not, however, consider the extent to which the form of television itself may have changed

¹ Jean-Christophe Royoux, 'Expanded Spectatorship: Narrative Strategies in the Work of James Coleman', *James Coleman*, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1999, 48.

² Royoux, 48.

³ Royoux, 27. Emphasis added.

⁴ Royoux, 28.

since the 1970s. Instead he tends to focus on continuities and distinctions between television and older literary and theatrical forms, such as those noted by Raymond Williams in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, first published in 1974.⁵

Williams' book remains one of the key texts in television studies – it continues to yield new insights and shape critical engagement with transformations in television. Nonetheless, it is apparent that television constitutes a *moving* target for artistic practice. In my view, Royoux's lack of direct engagement with the historical development of television since the mid-1970s does not invalidate his analysis of Coleman's practice. In fact it might point towards a possible connection between the pull of television – as object of artistic inquiry – and the notion that contemporary art functions as an 'ongoing present'. A full discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of my text so I will instead try to draw out some of the implications of Royoux's analysis by considering precisely *how* television is configured in *So Different...and Yet*.

So Different...and Yet is a single-screen video work, performed by Olwen Fouere and Roger Doyle, with a (distinctly televisual) duration of fifty minutes. In a text first published in 1994, Benjamin D. Buchloh describes the work, stating that 'a singular color monitor is displayed in a large white architectural frame, generating a sense of unusual sculptural formality'.⁶ The video is perceived as a single take, and features a continuous dialogue between a female and male protagonist who 'in rapid succession [...] assume the roles of a number of increasingly intertwined and disparate characters within a trivial melodrama'. The setting, although vaguely domestic, is rendered ambiguous through the use of a 'chroma-key' process, which amplifies certain colours (blue, red and green) and serves to dislocate the figures from their environment.

Occupying the foreground and often addressing herself towards the camera, the woman (whose name is Clarissa) continually rearranges herself on a couch, pointedly recalling Manet's *Olympia*, while in the background the man picks out a series of melodies on a grand piano. As Buchloh points out, *So Different...and Yet* is primarily concerned with the figuration and staging of patriarchal desire, with the female odalisque functioning as an 'allegorical device of the desire to 'figure'''. He pays particular attention to the costume worn by Clarissa – an outmoded green evening gown pompously described within the narrative as a 'creation' – and a 'red garland' spiralling around her leg from foot to thigh.⁷ This costume, Buchloh argues, functions to enforce

⁵ Royoux, 45.

⁶ Benjamin Buchloh, 'Memory Lessons and History Tableaux: James Coleman's Archaeology of Spectacle', *James Coleman*, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1999, 69.

⁷ Buchloh, 70.

the mechanism of scopic desire that the female figure embodies so that the desire for narrative itself – ‘as an archaic mythical structure’ – is put on display.

While Buchloh highlights the quasi-architectural presentation of the work he does not elaborate upon the precise relationship between its presentation and Coleman’s exploration of display and staging. In fact the presentation of *So Different...and Yet* is continually subject to change. Like Buchloh, Jean Fisher has examined the dynamics of desire, myth and narrative explored in Coleman’s practice and she contributes an essay on *So Different...and Yet* to the catalogue that accompanied its exhibition in Dublin, in 2009.⁸ Fisher claims that in this work, ‘we, the viewers, are physically included in the set as a “mirror” of the projected image’⁹ and she goes on to track a number of strategies used to achieve this mirroring. She notes that the video has been shown in many ways - on a monitor in a room with green lighting and a viewing couch (in its second exhibition of 1980), incorporated into a live work entitled *guaiRE*, with a set co-designed by Dan Graham (in 1985), presented in a set co-designed set by Liam Gillick (at the Whitechapel, in 2006), and projected in the form of a ‘didactic lecture’ (at MACBA, in 2007-2008).¹⁰

These exhibition strategies might be viewed as an engagement with the logic of the series, which is integral to television as theorised by Williams. But Fisher also reads the continual transformation of *So Different...and Yet* as an extension of Coleman’s critique of the mechanism of scopic desire and a critical engagement with the changing context of reception and ‘our subjection to increasingly disciplinary technocratic regimes’.¹¹ She argues that Coleman has responded to this situation not by attempting to ‘stand outside the reality of society and its symbolic framework’ but rather by considering the processes through which, following de Certeau, the consumer may take the signs of mass culture and use them according to his or her own needs.¹² As Fisher points out, Coleman has consistently explored the language and codes of popular cultural forms that are routinely dismissed as low status because they are aligned with consumption and femininity, such as the Mills and Boon romance, the photo-novel and the TV soap opera.

⁸ This exhibition was a collaborative venture involving IMMA, Project Arts Centre and the Royal Hibernian Academy. For more information see Maeve Connolly, ‘James Coleman’, *Artforum*, summer 2009, 349.

⁹ Jean Fisher, ‘*So Different...and Yet*’, *James Coleman*, Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2009, 36.

¹⁰ Fisher, 36-38.

¹¹ Fisher, 41

¹² Fisher, 41

In *So Different...and Yet*, Fisher identifies an exploration not only of these popular narrative forms but also an allusion – through the figure of ‘Clarissa’ – to the social and political developments that shaped the early history of the novel itself. She proposes that Coleman’s work addresses some of the same questions as Samuel Richardson’s 18th century epistolary novel *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady* (1747- 48). Marked by a sympathetic treatment of female characters, and a fascination with language and social mores, Richardson’s novel dramatises the ‘power struggle between an emerging moralistic bourgeoisie and a decadent aristocracy’, highlighting the extent to which ‘the self’ is never fully realisable.¹³ *So Different...and Yet* contests the disciplinary technocratic regime (theorised by Foucault, among others) by refusing to offer a privileged viewpoint, or transparency of meaning, and instead insisting upon what Fisher terms an ‘anamorphic gaze’ that demands both ‘mobility’ and ‘sensuous engagement’ from the viewer.¹⁴

This demand for mobility and sensuous engagement plays out differently in each presentation of *So Different...and Yet*. The historical dimension of the work’s critique of disciplinary regimes was perhaps particularly evident when it was shown at IMMA in 2009, in the courtyard of a building that actually pre-dates Richardson’s novel. The video was displayed on a large outdoor LED screen, similar in scale and technology to those found at sporting events and concerts or used in advertising, while the sound was relayed via speakers placed on the walls of the courtyard as well as in the reception area of the museum. The work could as a result be viewed and heard from a variety of vantage points, and in practice visitors tended to move around the courtyard, sometimes drawing close to the screen to examine its surface – a vast grid of tiny blue, red and green bulbs.

Further transformations of *So Different...and Yet* are both possible and likely but the presentation at IMMA could offer a useful starting point from which to consider the relationship between television and the ‘ongoing present’ of contemporary art. From one perspective, the use of a huge video screen suggests an overt embrace of what Fisher describes as ‘the manufactured identities and idle gossip that are the stuff of soap opera and “celebrity-watching”’.¹⁵ But the highly self-conscious inclusion of the viewer in the set, as the ‘mirror’ of the projected image, also draws attention to possible affinities between television and theatre, defined by Royoux as a form of ‘seeing oneself seeing’. Royoux notes that since Greek tragedy, theatre has claimed a ‘political function as a mirror held up to free men becoming conscious that they form a

¹³ Fisher, 42.

¹⁴ Fisher, 43.

¹⁵ Fisher, 46.

community *within* representation'.¹⁶ This political function is also claimed for certain forms of television, by those who see public service broadcasting (like the newspaper) as integral to the ongoing formation of the public sphere.¹⁷

Crucially, in *So Different...and Yet* at IMMA, these disparate understandings of television are held in tension with each other. The lack of visible editing and the succession of poses adopted by Clarissa in front of the camera recall the shared 'here and now' of an earlier era – the era of the TV continuity announcer seated in the studio. Clarissa is an ambiguous figure in this regard because, while visibly bored and restless, she is nonetheless the principal source of information concerning the unseen characters and events that propel the narrative forward. At IMMA, the 'set' amplified the alignment between television and authority because the huge screen commanded attention from a distance. Those who were compelled to walk across the courtyard encountered an image that dissolved into tiny lights but they also entered a distinct acoustic environment within which the clearly audible voices of Clarissa and her companion were reflected back from the walls of the museum, with the result that the onscreen figures seemed temporarily embodied. By amplifying the illusion of shared time and space associated with an earlier era to the point that it became almost theatrical, the presentation at IMMA offered a historical exploration of television, attuned to the possibility of future transformations.

¹⁶ Royoux, 44.

¹⁷ For a recent discussion of concepts of the public sphere in relation to broadcasting see Graham Murdock, 'Public Broadcasting and Democratic Culture: Consumers, Citizens and Communitards', *A Companion to Television*, edited by Janet Wasko, Oxford: Blackwell publishing, 2010, 174-198.