

THE AMATEUR HOUR: ON VALUE, PERSONALITY AND THE FORM OF APPEARANCE IN THE ECONOMY OF ATTENTION

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Taking part in a theater experience has a distinctly social quality; it entails participation in a public domain, a shared environment of individuals, in concrete spatiotemporal circumstances. Going to the theater, a practice that is developed mainly in leisure time, is in fact a distinctive form of coming together in a society. Most of the time this happens around the common value of a purchased good: the time of performance. That particular time usually commences with the purchase of a ticket, which seals an agreement between whoever offers the value and the purchaser, who rents and sits on her right of occupancy, of seeing, of being entertained. Whose profits these purchases contribute to is a matter of how capital articulates theater's "value" in a specific society; in other words, how capital creates, rates, and allows "theater production."

This essay intends to question the idea of theater production in materialistic terms, interrogating what is at stake in the sort of theater experience that takes place outside of a previously asserted and projected value, both on the part of the performer and the audience; what is at stake, in other words, in a theater production taking place outside of the traditional division of work and leisure. I shall focus on what I consider to be a specific phenomenon of American spectacle, which is at once rooted in peculiar conditions of social and artistic practices but is also identifiable as an enduring pattern in the history of American performing arts: the notion of the "amateur hour."¹ As I shall demonstrate, although produced beyond the time and space of work, the amateur hour is in fact intertwined with the idea of theater production that shapes the structure of US show business. Precisely for this reason, its close examination might provide openings for a critique of the grammar of the capitalist performing arts system, as well some

insights into the sorts of values produced out of the wage-labor system, upon which capital depends in order to operate.

The basic premise for this critique is the recognition that it is the destiny of the amateur hour to be allotted an exchange value on the market only subsequently, that is, a value that was not envisaged as a pre-condition for its existence. Amateur labor is subject to a market rationale that operates beyond the means of production of the performer, but the formation of value is always already embedded in a peculiar conjunction of spatiotemporal relations that come into play specifically in the audience's consumption. In this respect, a valuable influence on the development of my argument has been Miranda Joseph's analysis of the audience's productive consumption, involving an in-depth exploration of the idea of community and the different ways through which the discourse and practices of community are embedded in capitalism. According to Joseph, a critique of the romanticized notion of community is crucial not only for understanding how social formations, in their particularities, support and supplement the flow of capital, but also for highlighting how social relations are determined through modes of production and how they determine performative processes of productive consumption. These processes are not only generative for capitalism, but they also (potentially) exceed its system of evaluation.

I shall therefore employ expanded notions of both production and consumption, including activities that do not directly produce economic value but rather, and more importantly, enact social values by means of distinctive modes of performative production. My account investigates a voluntary, unpaid activity that could arguably be defined as "labor." The community in which this "labor" is performed is a community that, in Joseph's words, "generates and legitimates particularities and social hierarchies (of gender, race, nation, sexuality) implicitly required, but disavowed, by capitalism" (xxxii). In brief, the community where amateur labor is consumed is here considered as a privileged site for the exploitation process to occur. My analysis shall focus on the case study of a particular urban site: the downtown area of New York, where Henry Miner first launched the "amateur night" on the Bowery. In tracing the main features of this specific performative practice, I intend to examine the social process of production sustaining the creation of theater value in order to show how circulation and exchange are indeed collectively elaborated and deeply embedded in particular customs and

imagery as well as in historically determined circumstances that enable capital itself to be accumulated.

(DIS)ATTENDING THEATER ON THE BOWERY

I employ the expression *amateur hour* in order to engage the topic of amateurism from two related angles: its common consideration as an unnecessary or gratuitous practice and its specific temporal quality. First of all, I aim to acknowledge and emphasize that the very notion of amateur hour in the English language fell into a disparaging usage, one which points towards a narrow distinction between what is conceived as professional work and amateur status, understood as an unpaid, superfluous activity, which society supposedly allows as a childish counterpart to its more serious business. Such an acknowledgment is not devoid of significance, especially as I am writing this essay in English, which is for me a foreign language: as Gayatri Spivak points out, it is remarkable that Marx, discussing the development of the value-form, employs the concept-metaphor of a foreign language: “To compare money with language is . . . erroneous. Ideas do not exist separately from language. Ideas which have first to be translated out of their mother tongue into a foreign language in order to circulate, in order to become exchangeable, offer a *somewhat* better analogy; but the analogy then lies not in language, but in the foreignness of language” (Marx 163, emphasis in original). Although Spivak herself points to the fact that in this comparison Marx uses a necessarily pre-critical notion of language, by recalling the reference to the “foreignness of language” (165) she pinpoints the philosophical relevance of the linguistic transformation in Marx’s discourse of value in order to suggest that it is not possible to conceive a standard chain of signification in the creation of value, assuming the use value of labor as a stable signifier. “Discourse is before and not only after materiality,” she writes (159); in order to be put into circulation ideas must be translated into a foreign language just as the value of commodities must be translated into monetary worth. Pursuing the reflection further, Spivak draws on Saussure’s work on language alongside Marx’s comparison, emphasizing that linguistics has demonstrated how in the mother-tongue, too, “language is always already ‘foreign’” (165). What I take from Spivak’s argument is the necessity of acknowledging the complicity between cultural and economic value-systems, language being one of them. In our case, the word *amateur* does not retain the affective charge that

its etymology would imply but has through language circulation fallen into the domain of value and, in this process, been transformed. In this respect, employing the expression “amateur hour” as a historically stratified concept, I intend to highlight the radical separation of this phrase from its etymological reference to the supposedly free domain of love; a separation that occurred precisely by means of a discourse on value that retroactively enacted a discursive constraint on the expression itself.

Secondly, and more importantly, the expression *amateur hour* points to a temporal dimension, which is crucial for understanding the social dynamic of the particular theater experience I am exploring. Attending an amateur performance requires a distinctive mode of spectatorship that is relevant for reading the phenomenon as a whole. It is a mode of attending theater that entails both an extension and a constriction of theater time and its reception. It is a mode of attending theater as a *pastime*. Hence, our attendance is significantly different from “what we routinely understand theatre to be in Western industrial or post-industrial modernity” (Ridout 6). Nicholas Ridout has defined it as “a theatre in which one group of people spend leisure time sitting in the dark to watch others spend their working time under lights pretending to be other people. . . . a theatre that knows its own history, claims its place in the discourses of the arts, while acknowledging, with more or less good grace, its position in the economies of capitalist leisure” (6).

The theatricals we are here concerned with used to take place outside the lineage of the legitimate theater tradition. In the particular area of New York’s Bowery, where this form first emerged, it had to struggle to be allotted a place in the midst of other kinds of leisure activities. The sort of theater I am exploring—to play with Ridout’s definition of Western, bourgeois theater—is a theater which did not know its history, or at least did not follow a historical continuity, although it can be considered in relation to scattered previous traditions. It is a theater with no claim to a place in artistic discourses, nor with a proper place in art historiographies. But more importantly, it is a theater whose position is in ambiguous relation with the economies of capitalist leisure, although in some respects it arose simultaneously with the emergence of this very concept of leisure.

Since the eighteenth century the avenue known as the Bowery has hosted a great number of saloons, functioning as gathering places mainly attended by men, where alcohol was sold and gambling was

practiced, alongside prostitution. The proper birth of spectacle in New York City is commonly assumed to have happened at the turn of the nineteenth century, with the foundation of The Park in 1798,² the same year that the Dramatic Association wrote the “Declaration of Rights of American Theater” in Philadelphia, affirming the right to “rational amusement” against the prejudices of the Puritan tradition. Yet, despite such acquisition of legitimacy, during the early nineteenth century the practice of theater-going was still considered a debased habit and was mostly relegated to the marginal zones of cities; so the Bowery quickly became also the prime location for theater entertainment in New York.

Around the 1830s, however, New York hosted “the first splitting of American theatrical protozoa” (Trav S.D. 33), and soon two kinds of audiences started to be identifiable: venues hosting *legit theater* (mainly adaptations of Shakespearian dramas and plays strongly influenced by English cultural dominance) were mostly relocated uptown, preparing the way for the establishment of a respectable theater district attended by New Yorkers mainly living in uptown neighborhoods. Meanwhile, alongside saloons, theaters founded on the Bowery continued to offer—so to say—forms of “illegit theater”: rough plays featuring increasingly spectacular effects, attended and deeply influenced by a specific audience, who were part and parcel of the kind of entertainment proposed on stage. Not incidentally most actors performing in early nineteenth century Bowery plays were inhabitants of the area and as such often overlapped with the audience of the show. The relationship between the stage and the audience was very close. Until 1850, for instance, houselights were usually up during the show, and frequently spectators would interact with the stage. A clear example of this attitude can be recognized in the Bowery Boys’ sagas as well as in the overall typology of shows on stage in the Bowery Theatre.³ Furthermore, other kinds of venues flourished—music halls, opera houses, variety theaters, odeons—which hosted, as much as saloons did, a wide array of spectacles. In the entertainment offered in these venues the influence of a specific American tradition was clearly recognizable: that of the travelling shows and itinerant amusements common across the United States in the nineteenth century and henceforth becoming a staple in the space of the metropolis. From 1850, especially in concert saloons, a particular kind of performance became very successful: variety. It was a form imported from European stages, but it soon became distinctively American, for it succeeded in incorporating, in the form of *vaudeville*,

specific features of American society, such as the ethnic mix of first-generation Americans and the distinctive social and political coloration of their fun. The rise of vaudeville in American show business (1881-1932) was contemporary with the “birth of fun” in American society, part of the overall phenomenon that has been referred to as an “institutionalization of leisure” (Burke). This phenomenon is generally attributed to the transformation of work conditions in the aftermath of the industrial revolution, which, while contributing to the foundation of the modern capitalist economy, also granted workers an extra amount of time, which could be spent in new kinds of pastimes.

The particularity of the variety on show on the Bowery was that it was the social product of an encounter between saloon culture, with its stigma of vice and lasciviousness, and the great expansion of the dime museum, conceived especially by its main promoters—the most famous being P.T. Barnum—as a relatively safe and clean amusement for working class families. Those different kinds of entertainment shared one common feature: “show time” was fragmented, along with the attention devoted to it. In the saloon, the variety numbers could be enjoyed while drinking, talking, and observing other activities taking place in the house. In the dime museum, the performance piece competed with an array of other entertainment or pseudo-educational offers, such as the exposure of “human oddities” as well as natural history lectures or exhibitions. In a way, then, we could say that the Bowery spectatorship was a form of “dis-attending” rather than “attending” a show: it was practiced as a mode of distraction rather than in a focused theater environment. The experience of the show was part of the night out of an individual, an individual who, in some respects, can’t even be called “a spectator.” Likewise, the forms of spectacle on the Bowery stage would be incorrectly labeled as “theater;” rather, they formed part of the experience of hanging out at a given venue and witnessing performance acts similar to walking through a museum or attending a parade. Accordingly, attention was not granted in advance by the audience, and theater time—conceived as an agreed-upon segment of the day devoted to attending theater—was rather an expanded period available for potential theater encounters in a leisure atmosphere.

We might even suggest that this attitude was embedded in the very metropolitan experience, which vaudeville enacted fully. It is worth recalling that Walter Benjamin, discussing the distinction between the

reception of artworks in concentration and distraction, considered it important to suggest that the built environment “has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction” (241). While Benjamin’s theory of aura in relation to urbanism would require discussion beyond the scope of these pages, it is relevant to relate his reflections on distraction to the inner relationship between vaudeville (which some have etymologically linked to the French *voix-de-ville*, literally “voice of the city”) and the metropolitan experience, which played a great part in fashioning the very core of the genre. Furthermore, it is significant to point out that what Benjamin called “reception in a state of distraction” was a condition that the philosopher considered to be spreading to all artistic areas; finally finding “its true means of exercise” in film (242). Not surprisingly, films were later increasingly introduced into variety programs, occupying time slots between live acts. The shock effect that Benjamin ascribes to films, as a strategy of eye-catching during an otherwise distracted mode, was first rehearsed in vaudeville. Ironically, however, the film industry, which was to develop fully the idea of a mass-entertainment launched by vaudeville, would eventually contribute to the overall decline of vaudeville show business.

VARIETY, COMPETITION, AND THE INVENTION OF THE AMATEUR NIGHT

According to Albert McLean Jr., American vaudeville emerged out of a specific historical situation: the experience of becoming American, metropolitan citizens, for the increasingly larger number of immigrants who, throughout the first three decades of the nineteenth century, crowded into the American cities. Vaudeville, McLean suggests, can be considered a ritual, symbolizing the mythic enactment of taking part for the first time in city life, which was itself evolving in that very moment, especially in New York. In his in-depth account of the social meaning of the genre, McLean is at pains to analyze vaudeville as a metropolitan folk art, where both the heritage of immigrants’ home cultures and their aspiration to the myth of success can be recognized. Evidence for this process can be found in the careers of vaudeville stars like Fanny Brice—a young, Jewish girl from the Lower East Side and daughter of an immigrant saloon-owner—who within few years rose from the small circuit of the Bowery scene to become a major star in the Broadway Ziegfeld Follies. Another example is Buster

Keaton, the offspring of a famous vaudeville family, who was to become one of the founding fathers of American cinema. On a social level, then, vaudeville introduced a number of individuals and groups to the cultural mainstream, offering them the opportunity for social advancement regardless of ethnicity, gender, or religion, although its very functioning as a genre largely capitalized on stereotypes of race, gender, and religion (see McLean). Overall, then, vaudeville could be, and has largely been, read as a truly democratic institution as well as a veritable platform for the launching of the American dream.

However, just as the American dream is an expression of political utopianism, it also stands in relation to one of the fundamental principles of American economy: competition. Profit, in fact, derives from the possibility of adding to the exchange value of a performance in market conditions, a market featuring a *variety* of goods. Literally, then, the essence of competition is variety. Vaudeville as a form involved multiple acts, competing with each other for the audience's attention, so that they could be reiterated on other occasions. Therefore, access to the vaudeville world depended entirely on the capability of finding a spot in the multifaceted market of variety by means of competition.

On the Bowery scene, one of the most popular platforms for breaking in a vaudeville act was the "amateur night" in theaters that devoted one night a week to a tryout for would-be performers competing for a cash prize. On these nights there was no ticket for the show, and money was made mainly from the sale of alcohol. Various acts were performed while people were drinking, talking, and engaging in all sorts of activities. Sometimes, however, an act would catch the attention of spectators and suddenly become a hit on the vaudeville circuit. This happened, for instance, to the Marx Brothers, to Eva Tanguy, and to Mae West, each of whom made their way into the mainstream industry through a debut in the amateur hour of the Bowery.

On amateur night there was no expectation of good entertainment, but every person who walked on stage was allowed a portion of performance time. Breaking an act meant the possibility of entering the show business market, but it also meant running the risk of competition and its rules. This risk was clearly understood by Henry Clay Miner, who went so far as to embody the rejection of an act in the vaudeville market with a particularly cruel form of entertainment. In Miner's Bowery Theatre (founded in 1878) he established one of the most famous amateur nights in New York and there launched the

practice of “the hook,” which soon became widespread on vaudeville stages.

During amateur nights at the Miner’s a bad act could be publicly punished by means of this infamous humiliation. Faced with an act that failed to entertain, not only would the audience react crudely by throwing objects onto the stage, but Henry Clay Miner himself would drag the failed vaudevillian offstage by the neck with a hook. A long pole curved at one end and grasped at the other, the hook was supposedly fashioned after a shepherd’s crook but was also an object that recalled a tool employed by sailors on ships for untangling ropes, and there is evidence that this object was later used by stagehands to reach up into the flies to pull down ropes or paraphernalia stuck there. This association is significant in relation to the Bowery scene, not least because of the proximity of the area to the New York harbor and the likely familiarity of the working class Bowery audience with sailors’ customs. Furthermore, the sailor’s hook may be considered a powerful metaphor for the act of throwing someone back “into the sea” of unemployment, preventing the aspirant vaudevillian from making a start in show business. In a way, then, the hook practice became a ritual of barring access to the economic sphere.

Although the amateur night did not imply an *a priori* economic distinction between theater workers and theatergoers, the hook ratified failure in a work context: the theater manager would take responsibility for enacting it on the audience’s behalf and for channeling it into a form of standardized performance. The work dynamic, as it were, haunted the leisure of the amateurs, and such a haunting depended mainly on the potential critical evaluation of each performance by the audience. In this retrospective attribution of value, amateur performance became a form of labor.

THE PRODUCTION OF VALUE AND THE CIRCULATION OF THE THEATER COMMODITY

Before proposing an account of the way theater value was produced in the context of the amateur night, let us briefly linger on how the question of value has been theoretically articulated in Marx’s fundamental account (appearing mainly in the first chapter of *Capital* and in the *Grundrisse*). In Marx’s scheme, value is what is extracted by the use value of the commodity. Use value refers to the particularity and concreteness of the commodity immediately produced and used

by a human being. Exchange value is the value that emerges when one commodity is substituted for another on the basis of an equivalence that supposedly exists between the amounts of labor contained in each commodity. In the exchange-relation the commodities appear independent of their use value: only by abstracting the use-value from the product of labor is it possible to obtain what Marx defines simply as “value” and which he considers as “the form of appearance” of the labor that went into making the commodity. Commodities, then, participate in two orders of value, one being consubstantial to their use, the other being in play in the moment of exchange. By virtue of the latter, commodities become the bearers of value available for circulation.

The basic premise of later critiques of Marx’s theory of value pivots around what Marx supposedly posits as the origin of this economic chain as well as the question of representational equivalence—that is, in a word, labor. Labor would be represented by value, in turn abstracted and represented by money, which is then transformed as capital. However, as Spivak argues, Marx himself offers a more complex open-endedness at the origin of the economic chain: before labor, in fact, Marx considers labor-power as potentially bearing a use-value and defines it as the possibility for a subject to be adequate for labor. Labor-power “distinguishes itself from the ordinary crowd of commodities in that its use value creates value, and a greater value than it costs itself” (Marx 342, qtd. in Spivak 154). Therefore value stands both inside and outside value determination as it precedes the actual labor and also partakes in the exchange process.

In investigating Marx’s theory of value, Diane Elson proposes a crucial shift in the common reading of the theory: she proposes a “value theory of labor,” rather than a labor theory of value. The crucial point she makes is to emphasize that under the capitalist mode of production labor itself is actually determined by value rather than the other way around (i.e. value being determined by labor), insofar as it is the wage-money relation, and not labor-time, which determines what activities are accorded economic value. In Elson’s view, the primary object of Marx’s theory was not explaining price determination but rather investigating the specific forms that labor takes, assuming that value is in fact not a transhistorical category but a socially determined one. Accordingly, the definition of labor is dependent upon the sort of value that a particular social formation attributes to specific

conditions of production. Indeed, the notion that Marx simply calls value is determined by the social process of production itself, which is always circumstantial: first of all, the commodity must have a social value, insofar as it must be recognizable by a given society in order to be exchanged and put into circulation in the market economy.

Shifting the focus from the way labor determines value to the way value enables labor itself to be defined as such is particularly relevant when considering the dynamics of commodification in the amateur night. It is worth recalling that while happening outside of a proper work time/space, for the amateur vaudevillians the amateur night was regarded as a possibility of accessing the job market of show business. Therefore, the performance offered *for free* participated in fact in a process that—when successful—can be considered a distinctive form of exploitation, since it was a practice agreed upon by both performers and potential impresarios that would increase the power of the latter. If the particular ability or success achieved by the performer during the amateur night could be subsequently invested in show business, it was precisely by means of the exploitation of a product whose means of production the (potential) worker (i.e. the performer) did not control and that was achieved by means of a competition with other (potential) workers. In order to account for the specificity of this exploitation, it is important to consider the particular social formation in which the process of “amateur production” took place.

What was crucial to the amateur performer on the stage of the amateur night was to realize, in Marx’s terminology, the *form of appearance* of her value. Here language proves to be extremely accurate in relation to vaudeville: the possibility of success for a vaudeville act, in fact, relied exactly on the particular *appearance* that the performer would be able to achieve. A good vaudevillian, in other words, was first of all the performer capable of producing a specific body-image, one that was striking, effective, and, more importantly, recognizable to the audience. Facial make-up, costumes, and poses as well as identity stereotypes were all functions of what Robert Snyder has defined as the “synthetic” equilibrium between realism and fictionality in vaudeville types (180). Ethnicity, gender, and sexuality featured prominently in the construction of this body-image—aspects of vaudeville that have been accounted for elsewhere in terms of their social, historical, and political implications (see Erdman, Hodin, Lott). With reference to our current argument, it is especially relevant to consider how these particularities

were both generated and marketed within the Bowery community.

Especially in early vaudeville, a prominent element of performance was the presentation of a *personality*, intended as a synthesis of relevant traits of a recognizable, public behavior. In Warren Susman's analysis, the rise of the concept of personality largely affected early nineteenth century American culture and society and marks a crucial shift from the eighteenth century idea of *character* (mainly related to the development of moral qualities, essential for the maintenance of social order) to the fashioning of an individualistic public appearance, featuring uniqueness and originality as signs of distinction in mass culture as well as in the capitalist economy. In Susman's words, "the social role demanded of all by the new culture of personality was that of a performer. Every American was to become a performing self" (281).

In the context of the Bowery scene, the construction of a personality was for the amateur vaudevillians primarily a matter of capitalizing on some of the basic features of their own selves (personality, after all, was supposed to be achieved by emphasizing the most effective traits of one's social singularity). Mostly, the personality was displayed by means of a performative behavior that could be expressed, especially, through a powerful body appearance. In light of the commodification process, the successful elaboration of a personality in the amateur night may be considered the first step toward the creation of a theater commodity. In this respect, it is relevant to refer to David Harvey's elaboration on the body as a primary site and, more importantly, strategy of capital accumulation. According to Harvey, the body functions as variable capital:

The mix of performative activities available to the body in a given place and time are not independent of the technological, physical, social, and economic environment in which that body has its being. . . . The effect is to say that different social practices 'produce' (both materially and representationally) radically different kinds of bodies. Class, racial, gender, and all manner of other distinctions are marked upon the human body by virtue of the different socio-ecological processes that do their work upon that body. (403)

What I take from Harvey's argument is that at the site of the body the process of production goes through several stages, involving both exchange and consumption. As we have pointed out, in vaudeville consumption took place in conditions of distraction; that is, not in

a focused relation with an “artwork” but rather, to echo Benjamin’s words, in an incidental fashion. Likewise, the encounter with the personality in the amateur night might or might not happen; certainly, it was neither expected nor paid for up front. But if a personality was produced in the brief time of performance and recognized as such, it immediately attained economic value.

Drawing on Harvey’s argument, Miranda Joseph suggests that “social formations, families, and communities are also accumulation strategies” (40) insofar as—just like bodies—they produce and are produced by a realm of values (involving, among others, shared conceptions of gender, class, race, sexuality, family values, or religion). The specific productive consumption of the Bowery audience, in a sense, impinged upon the different personalities produced and consumed, providing a space for the accumulation of what was later to be developed as proper capital. In relation to our case study, it is worth pointing out that when accounting for the many “personality manuals” published in the first decade of the nineteenth century, Susman remarks how “the new personality literature stressed items that could be best developed in leisure time and that represented in themselves an emphasis on consumption” (281). The community of leisure in the Bowery constituted the site of variable capital for the amateur performance since it enabled a distinctive circulation process of the personality, that is, of the *form of appearance* of amateur labor. In order to gain leisure a potential spectator could have a try-out in the amateur night. If she won the cash prize, she was then able to spend this money on attending other amateur nights. But in order to succeed, she would have to catch the attention of a dis-attending audience and accumulate what Georg Franck has termed “attentive capital” (n.p.). The ability to catch the attention of the audience—through movements, like Buster Keaton, speech and postures, like the Marx Brothers, or the cunning articulation of an exuberant personality, as in the case of Eve Tanguy—along with the audience’s recognition of this labor bestowed value onto the performance, transforming the amateur into a “worker” and, in this manner, enabling her to enter the market economy.⁴ By contrast, when the amateur performer failed to entertain, she would be dragged by hook off-stage as well as the market sphere: as Harvey points out, those who cannot function for capital (for physical, psychic or social reasons) are rejected into the underclass, since the way capitalism operates as a social system pivots around the crucial distinction between “employed

‘insiders’ and unemployed ‘outsiders’” (408). If the amateur was successful, the cash prize functioned less as a wage for her performance than as a promise of paid work.

In this regard, the amateur night re-produced, in a leisure situation, a relation between performers and spectators that resembled very closely that of mainstream theater, where performers were actually “employed.” As Trav S.D. writes:

Vaudeville was an industry in which success could be measured scientifically and instantaneously using the world’s most ancient form of marketing survey: applause. The vaudevillian was in the rare position of knowing how well he was doing financially coming right out of the gate. . . . Vaudevillians emerged from the people (in the case of amateur nights, quite literally). . . . That the audience was composed by ‘customers’ implies that they were sold a ‘product.’ That product was the performers themselves, and pouring on the charm was called ‘selling it.’
(90)

When the vaudeville number was extracted from the community of leisure, it was ready to enter the actual economy of show business. Language is again significant here: the term *busy-ness* literally indicates a practice of “doing” something, of putting to work, as opposed to leisure time, where supposedly there is neither commitment nor agreement to ‘produce.’

The moment an impresario would hire a vaudeville performer for a Broadway variety show, or launch her on a national tour, agreeing to allot her wages (however low), the theater commodity was marketed. Part of its appeal as a commodity was precisely the social formation that had produced it. “Productive consumption of the commodity labor power in the labor process under the control of the capitalist requires, inter alia, the mobilization of ‘animal spirits,’ sexual drives, and creative powers of labor to a given purpose,” Harvey writes (406). In other words, the very leisure society of the Bowery, along with the social practices, habits, and aura that it stood for, had conferred additional value, surplus value, to the commodity it had produced involuntarily. More than that, the labor produced by the failed amateurs during the amateur hour had contributed directly, by virtue of competition, to the value of the personality-commodity that succeeded.

**THE AMATEUR NIGHT: LOVE'S LABOR OR
PROJECTION TOWARDS CAPITAL?**

Although specific to a particular social formation and historical situation, the exploitation process observed in the structure of the amateur night is not isolated in the history of show business, nor is it related only to the turn of the century as a particular historical moment in the capitalist economy. Especially in New York entertainment, the amateur hour can be considered an enduring pattern that underwent various evolutions and returns throughout the twentieth century. The fundamental dynamic that the amateur hour enacts is to convert a private, voluntary desire to perform into public, theatrical capital to be exploited later on. The conditions for this exploitation were enabled by the very leisure time during which the performance had developed, where an unpaid, voluntary activity is charged with an exchange value unrecognized as such in advance and assigned only by means of an *a posteriori* evaluation.

But the productive labor of audience consumption always requires new forms of value to be introduced on the market. Show business keeps returning to and generating ever-new articulations of the amateur hour: the 1960s New York underground scene provides a good example for this return. In some respects, the Bowery as inherited by downtown artists in the sixties featured some surprising similarities with nineteenth century Bowery culture: the area was still inhabited by lower class citizens, other immigrants had moved to the city (such as Andy Warhol, second generation American with Ruthenian origins, or the Italian American Joe Cino, John Vaccaro, and Penny Arcade, along with many other youths who had moved to the metropolis in late 1950s from different parts of the States), and a large landscape of cafés and nightclubs still flourished, offering a great number of shared public/private spaces for social gatherings. Partly due to the so-called “blue laws” (i.e. city laws that regulated entertainment and nightlife in New York), which were dusted off during the sixties, many café-theaters were unregulated (e.g. Café La Mama, Caffè Cino), and performances were often presented illegally in unconventional spaces, without the sale of tickets. The underground scene—also called Off-Off Broadway—was kept alive through money raised from the sale of food and beverages. Just as in the nineteenth century Bowery saloons, these underground venues were mainly “hangouts,” where people would regularly meet and

dis-attend performances. And just as in the old Bowery days, success on stage depended on the production of recognizable body images and distinctive personalities.

The main forms of performance on the Off-Off Broadway circuit were the double bill, featuring two one-act shows, and the so-called showcase nights, where several one-act plays were presented. Some of these acts were, without doubt, weak; they were loosely structured around a script, put on without rehearsals, and sometimes simply improvised. Plays were composed and performed by unemployed people, often living on welfare or doing day-jobs, who practiced theater activities in their leisure time. In other words, most performers on the Off-Off Broadway scene were amateurs, and even those who were aspiring to start a career in professional theater did not consider the “small time” of the underground as anything other than a try-out. Nevertheless, since the mid-sixties mainstream show business had started looking more closely at the amateur hour of the underground scene, scouting for new, potential workers. Directing its attention to the underground, it not only emphasized that the scene was “worth” existing but also questioned the position of Off-Off Broadway performers in the entertainment market.⁵ As in vaudeville, some artists from the Off-Off Broadway circuit started to make a profit of their amateurish, self-taught performance ability; among them, for instance, Tom Egan, Bette Midler, and Tom O’Horgan—all of whom became major stars on Broadway and in Hollywood by presenting a personality or a performance mode that had proved “valuable” in a social environment existing outside of a proper economic market. Besides having occurred roughly in the same urban area, the particular example briefly outlined also suggests that the dynamic that I have called exploitation is not exclusively at work in popular entertainment but also haunts the so-called avant-garde.

Both in the case of Bowery vaudeville and 1960s avant-garde, a significant amount of affective labor sustains the amateur hour as a project, involving collective participation and individual desires. Arguably, this social space entails not only the potential for exploitation but also the possibility for the recognition of values other than monetary exchange (such as solidarity, friendship, inter-ethnic encounters, formation of a public sphere). In other words, much more is to be said about the narrative of love that underlines this labor.

With this paper, I have sought to challenge the linguistic depreciation

of the concept of amateur performance from a “work of love” to a “superfluous activity.” I have also sought to counter the forgetfulness that obscures not only show business’s continuing investment in the amateur performance but also the fact that we are increasingly participating in an economy based on voluntary, unpaid, and only retrospectively evaluated labor. This labor—whether it is that of the performer or any other immaterial laborer—finds its stable signifier in love, and not in labor, precisely because it happens in the awareness of not being economically evaluated up front. Beside the successful amateur vaudevillian, who catches the attention, there are, inevitably, a significant number of amateurs who do not get the chance to enter the economy, who continue to await a potential evaluation, who don’t quite make it. Discussing whether their activities might be accorded the status of “labor”—no matter how or if they are economically evaluated as such—implies interrogating the forms that labor takes in the capitalist system as well as in the performing arts. This interrogation, as Diane Elson suggests referring to Marx’s theory of value primarily as an attempt to understand “why labor takes the forms it does,” implies “political consequences” (123), especially since capital constantly modifies what counts as “labor.” Likewise the notion of “theater production” is affected by such interrogation since it deals with particular products (i.e. the shows) that are *per definitio* consumed, as we suggested at the beginning of this analysis, in a public domain and participate in the coming together of a society, which might (or should) be defined as a “polis,” at least for as long as the assembly lasts. But regardless of whether such productive consumption is considered as the prime site of an exploitation process or as a productive space of affective relations within a community, one point is clear: while value exists in a culture already split into two different spheres, one labeled leisure and one labeled work, the amateur hour continues to function as the occluded face of “legit theater.”

NOTES

¹ The expression “amateur hour” was made famous by the 1940s radio and television talent show “Major Edward Bowes’s Amateur Hour,” but goes back to a much older tradition, as I intend to show with this essay.

² Prior to this date two spaces had been hosting theater shows in New York: a theater on Nassau Street (1732-1765) and a theater on John Street (1767-1798). They mainly hosted amateur shows by English troupes. See Mary Henderson, *Theater in America*.

³ On the Bowery Boys' Sagas, see Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* and Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York*.

⁴ I am thankful to Nick Ridout for offering me critical discussion on this particular passage of my argument. In our conversation on the matter, he pointed out that the amateur night is in fact a distinct example of Marx's theory according to which labor power is a commodity, the special commodity that can actually make more value than it has.

⁵ In 1965 the Actors' Equity Association issued the "showcase code," stating that Union actors could perform without a salary only in free shows if playing less than ten times, for no longer than three weeks, and that shows should not be advertised nor attended by more than a hundred spectators. These features, in fact, did not affect the inner economy of Off-Off Broadway since the circuit was already working under those conditions; but clearly the arrival of Unions regulations on the underground scene marked a shift in the possibility of participation in downtown theater for professional actors.

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