



PLAY DATE IN THE FAME COMPLEX

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The band Arcade Fire's driving, intelligent, often beautiful art-rock advances modest formal experimentation without sacrificing emotional depth. That isn't easy to do, and their achievement has been well received, enough that in 2011 the group won Album of the Year at the Grammy Awards, for *The Suburbs*. As a fan of Arcade Fire's ambitions and music I am usually curious to see what they've been up to, which is why I recently took time to watch a music video created by the band to promote their latest album, *Reflektor*. Directed by Roman Coppola, the colorful video for the song "Here Comes the Night Time" features the seven-member group performing in a crowded dance club and comes with a bonus: cameo appearances by a number of currently popular Hollywood actors and comedians — James Franco, Ben Stiller, Michael Cera, Aziz Ansari among them — saying this and that in scripted club-themed vignettes. While I didn't much care for the song, we all know new musical directions often need time to grow on the listener, so eventually I may love it. The video itself elicited a less charitable response. I hated it — far too strong a reaction, you'd think, to so harmless a critter. Isn't a music video featuring walk-ons by currently popular entertainers merely a more recent bottling of the show biz fizz served us in *The Big Broadcast of 1938* and *Circus of the Stars*? We've been downing the stuff for years, so what's there to get riled about?

As a genre, music videos have been around since the 1960s, pioneered by visual artist Bruce Conner and, independently, The Beatles. The birth of MTV in the early 1980s made them a cultural staple and, for a time, something to talk about. That was then. The days when a music video had cultural impact worth discussing — indeed of anyone caring one way or another about it as a communication form — are in the past; MTV itself

replaced them years ago with reality shows. But music videos are still being made, and since producing them costs real money, we can only assume that somewhere along the line the form proved itself, to the recording industry, a sufficiently useful marketing tool.

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Their very functionality keeps them from attaining high levels of art. Conceived to sell something other than themselves, music videos are saddled with an illustrative aspect whether or not the image track closely corresponds to lyric content. And however vital a video's individual components, in combination pop music, pop stardom, youth, and “concept” can't be guaranteed to take flight. More dependable is the impress of music business machinery. To make a music video agents and managers, publicists and lawyers get into the act. Your people contact my people to talk over budgets, schedules, intellectual property agreements — the arrangements. Taken together these arrangements — the artifice of deal-making — constitute a kind of aesthetic, and it's this aesthetic that colors Arcade Fire's “Here Comes the Night Time” video, in which reciprocal, all-access-pass fandom is on insular display: Arcade Fire is a fan of Franco, Cera etc, and vice versa. Famous people having as much right to their fandom as anyone, the only substantive difference between theirs and yours plays out in terms of scale — in effect, how celebrities may exercise their fandom. Fame has its privileges. The chances that a star will gain access to the objects of his fandom far surpass our own.

It happens that in this race I do have a horse. From a base in the art world I've been reflecting, in artworks and books, on the similarities and differences between artists and entertainers for almost thirty years, and through the process of connecting to an audience, I've acquired a public life. Though I long ago lost interest in actively using public identity, in the post-modern fashion, as a material — or did I just lose my nerve? — it is there, earned but dormant, should I change my mind. Arcade Fire and the Hollywood performers who appear in their video are, then, public figures of one sort and I, an artist and writer of more modest public mien, am one of another. What they make travels through the culture in a different way than what I make but I have as much claim to this culture — it is as much mine — as any artist whose abilities are configured to play in popular media. I'm tooting this horn because I intend that the critique I'm here advancing should be cast in artist-to-artist terms. I am not a critic. I have zero interest in the "text" of the video and whether or not there is one. I am, rather, an artist asking, "What are these artists making?" What are they doing with our culture? What are they doing with their opportunity? What are they doing with their easy access to our attention? Just what is transacted with us by presenting a work that is for all intents and purposes a visual analog of name dropping? It's entirely fair to ask such questions since by the very nature of their work these people ask for our time.

From the evidence of their musical output — anxious anthems for an anxious time — indie-rockers Arcade Fire do not seem natural candidates for the absorption process historically referred to as "going Hollywood." And the sight of young alt-pop masters teaming up with comedic actors for a play date in the Fame Complex is, I will admit, disheartening. (Isn't there something a little bro about this video as well? Somehow it just doesn't

seem a premise that would interest a woman.) But objections of these sorts have their limits. Isn't the narrative wherein Underground Artist Gains Mainstream Acceptance a classic way that any culture advances? We want good art to find an audience. Artists can't be asked to stay underground forever (although some prefer to remain there), and commercial success is itself a reality to explore. A music video like "Here Comes the Night Time" is just part of that process, isn't it? As for the presence of all those actors, Hollywood has always been about "personalities," so why should seeing a gaggle of them here give us pause?

Does it not qualify as an act of bad faith to base work upon the assumption that I, as your audience, believe some sort of magic attaches to celebrity and that merely reminding me of my belief is sufficient to constitute not only a transaction but a work?

I do realize that every generation gets their chance to be at the success party. You can't keep people from attending. You can't tell them not to go. However, anyone is just as free to decline the invitation and do something else with their time — and by extension, with ours. Declining the invitation to the party is always an option.

None of those who appear in "Here Comes the Night Time" made that choice. None said no to business arrangements intended to increase the likelihood that we would watch and talk up this video — omg it's James f'n Franco! Michael f'n Cera! Bon-f'n-o! — and, thereby, give it promotional momentum. Why would an invitation of this kind when a) entertainers decline

participating will most likely be fun/painless, and b) it's business as usual in a business dependent on — expert at — attention-getting? Anyway, when it comes to our friends' work, don't we, all of us, tend to suspend critical judgment?

These arguments may make sense from the supply side. But the supposition that an aesthetic of business arrangements is sufficient and deserving of attention is one that the consumer has every right to question.

Vehicles with these aspirations annoy us when their authors are uncool people whose art we dismiss. How is it any better when a work of business aesthetics is sponsored by cool people whose art we dig?

This consumer half-expected to see Bob Hope pop up in the “Here Comes the Night Time” video, such are the coordinates of its aesthetic ambitions. That a music video which showcases an alternative, indie band and alt-comedy players should cause a viewer to anticipate an appearance by Bob Hope is troubling. As a sexagenarian, Bob Hope donned a hippie wig and love beads to mock that era's counter-culture on network television, if you want to know his opinion of trying to work and live outside the mainstream. Bob Hope was an establishment entertainer who had gained power within the post-war entertainment system, and he exercised that power to keep himself before the cameras and microphones, serving his own interests far longer than he served the culture's. To today create a work whose aesthetic coordinates are sufficiently self-satisfied to suggest the imminent appearance of an entertainer of his ilk amounts to, if I am not over-stating it, a species of generational artistic

treason. How is the value system in the “Here Comes the Night Time” video fundamentally differentiated from a Bob Hope television Christmas spectacular featuring Joey Heatherton? What was the point of all that effort by people who devoted themselves to giving this culture better alternatives? Why had we gone to all the trouble of hand-building options to taking the interstate if in the end all roads still lead to Bob Hope Drive (an actual road in Rancho Mirage, California, if you didn't know it)?

Music videos are not, I recognize, these artists' primary endeavor (director Coppola possibly excepted?); they're just part of the reward for jobs well done in other arenas. Success begets the perks of success. Fine, we get it. As conceived, though, in order for it to work the “Here Comes the Night Time” video requires the audience to look upon the Won Perk as in itself theater sufficiently worth our attention. If for any reason the audience isn't willing to sign the contract proffered — if, for instance, the audience resists finding any fascination in the self-regard of performers who have agreed to appear on a business-aesthetic platform — then the circuit is broken, and the transaction collapses.

Refusal to sign that contract calls for some degree of self-possession on the part of audience members, true, but in fact many, many audience members are sufficiently self-possessed. The current concept of “celebrity” blends a dizzyingly powerful set of mythologies: it-could-happen-to-you, change-your-name-change-your-fate, sky's-the-limit, only-in-America — into a cultural absinthe with the potential to cloud our judgment but the self-possessed audience member keeps his wits. He or she will be heard to ask, reasonably: Why is it interesting to watch a celebrity do *anything*? And further: Does it not qualify as an act of

bad faith to base work upon the assumption that I, as your audience, believe some sort of magic attaches to celebrity and that *merely reminding me of my belief is sufficient to constitute not only a transaction but a work?* I think it does qualify as exactly that. An invitation to complete a circuit of bad faith is disturbing under any circumstances but it's more emphatically disturbing here, for the reason that we do not expect strata of culture that seek to offer or embody any kind of "alternative" to be operating in bad faith. That they were never to do this was part of the point — very likely *the point* — of alternative subcultures. They were not going to act in bad faith. They might do business, they couldn't be expected to forego doing business, but — a very different thing — they were not going to generate culture from within the frame of a business aesthetic. This was the contract with their audience. This was how they were going to distinguish themselves from the mainstream culture. This was to be their difference, fundamentally.

So, yes, it does bother me that artists of a generation who have been exposed to the identical history of the imperial phase of American show biz — the Bob Hope phase — as the rest of us should opt to reinforce that template. Don't ask us to watch you splash about in culture-foam in support of your latest product and expect us to applaud you. Vehicles with these aspirations annoy us when their authors are uncool people whose art we dismiss. How is it any better for the cultural ecosystem when a work of business aesthetics is sponsored by cool people whose art we dig? In an era when our culture is wading up to its eyeballs in the ludicrous notion that it somehow constitutes interesting theater simply to observe a celebrity do something — the post-war imperial style entering its mannerist phase — we expect our better artists either to have enough self-discipline to eschew applications of magic that fit a Gaussian blur over our

judgment or else to inflate these until they shatter and in shattering liberate us.

Since 1938 we have collectively, as a culture, sat through *The Big Broadcast of 1938* (which movie, as it happens, featured the young Bob Hope) many times. As a culture we could sit through it yet again — and no doubt will; there are periods when Hollywood seems to have imagination for little else. Fortunately, we now have genuine alternatives to this fare. The entertainment system no longer enjoys a lock on what constitutes entertainment. There's real competition now, underwritten by an irreversible evolution of technology. Imaginations independent of both the art and entertainment systems may efficiently create using pop languages — movies, TV, music — and, crucially, via the internet, get them to an audience. Reinforce *that* template, you Arcade Fires of the world. It's in your interest, and it's unquestionably in ours.