

LOUIS CABRI / the mannequin & the inverse ratio: Roy Miki's *Mannequin Rising*

Justice can never rise superior to the economic conditions of
society and the cultural development conditioned by them.
—Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*

Economic language prevails in *Mannequin Rising* (hereafter *MR*).

The first poem in the long sequence, “Scoping (also pronounced ‘Shopping’) in Kits,” introduces economic language in its title and in the very first couplet:

There are more fealties than
one can safely stock in the store (11)

By placing *store* and *stock* in the same verse line, separated by only two words, a reader notices that each can interchangeably function as noun and verb (in different phrases). So this line points to a kind of grammatical levelling. Because *store* and *stock* are partially synonymous as well, one effect of this grammatical levelling is to produce lexical redundancy-in-abundance: Having two partially synonymous words so close together creates a sense of redundancy, yet that there is more than one of them creates a sense of abundance.

Levelling and redundancy-in-abundance, being dimensions of a capitalist economy, are qualities of consumer culture that emerge in *MR*. Levelling arises when a thing or process acquires exchange or market value. Redundancy-in-abundance, the way I’m using this phrase, refers to conditions of labour (“surplus” labour, a structural feature of capitalism) and products of labour (overproduction; planned obsolescence). In the second line, levelling and redundancy-in-abundance emerge through a structural homology between economics and language, and elsewhere in *MR* in the figure of the mannequin.

The first line of the “Scoping” sequence describes brand loyalties as “fealties.” The word *fealties* implies an anachronistic economic regime, feudalism. Being born into a caste system fixing one’s status for life is made analogous here to the power brand loyalties can exert over people from a young age. The first couplet

says there are more brand loyalties out there than one can shake a stick at (I use the formulaic expression organizing the couplet itself), suggesting, further, that at play are broad issues of supply and demand, as well as fine (but no less economic) distinctions to be made between desire, want and need.

Even the adverb *safely* implies economic language: the sticks of litigation, the carrots of efficiency.

Excepting Miki's book title, the word *mannequin* first appears in *MR* in the seventh couplet of this first poem in the "Scoping" sequence (the poem has nine couplets in all), and enters abruptly:

The inverse ratio of production costs left
the mannequin speechless for the first time

The crux of my essay rests on how to interpret these two lines.

There's wobble in the definite articles. A remark by Kenneth Burke captures something of what I mean by wobble: "All thought tends to name things not because they are precisely as named, but because they are not quite as named . . ." (54). Burke's statement questions the reach of literary values for precision, accuracy, *le mot juste*. He suggests that such atomistic values for language and for the world (values that are part of the modernist inheritance) sometimes fall short before the world's complexity. There's wobble in a world when maps for it, maps of thought, writing, and poetic form, somehow do not always line up or correspond with each other. There's a bit of wobble in placing *stock* and *store* on the same line. There's wobble especially in the definite article in front of *mannequin*.

When a *the* is used before a noun like *mannequin*, usually a reader refers back in the text to the previous instance(s) of the noun for context (the mannequin? which mannequin? If the noun were *sun*, I don't think a reader would ask which sun? unless the poem demanded it), but (as mentioned) there is no prior instance of a mannequin appearing in *MR* at this point (ten pages in). The definite article in the line *the mannequin speechless for the first time* gestures to a time before, when the mannequin did speak, but such "time before" is not part of the reader's time of reading *MR*. By another wobble, this "time before," I'm going to suggest, refers to outside the text, to historical time. Use of *the* before a noun can also invoke the idea of essence, the essence of the noun. In the second line, then, the essence of what "mannequin" means is to be found in a time before now. There is

no single figure of “the” mannequin in *MR*; mannequins in *MR* mostly exist in an undifferentiated plurality, further suggested by the varied spellings for *mannequin* throughout the text.

The first line in that seventh couplet also establishes a relationship to historical time. The definite article before *inverse ratio of production costs* suggests that the phrase designates a historical period captured by the essence of an economic formula that shaped it. The formula in question has to be the presuppositional force behind a market-driven culture whose evaluative criterion is:

The less a product costs to
make,
the more profit capitalists
make.

“Inverse ratio”: short for the fundamental law of capital accumulation, which has been around since Shakespeare at least.

Because of the definite article wobbles, I infer from these lines that the time of “the mannequin” that speaks historically *predates* the time when “the inverse ratio of production costs” became dominant.¹ These lines ask that history be painted in broad strokes.

The questions, *What did you make?* and *How much did you make?* didn’t always mean the same thing. *What did you make?* once meant that “you” made something. What kind of mannequin would be made where the money required to make it and the making process itself were not predetermined and limited by the fundamental law of capital accumulation?

In *MR*, consumers are mannequin-like in their social effects: homogenous, memory-less. Like mannequins, consumers go unseen: there only to support and humanize the commodity for sale. *MR*’s mannequins embody a consumer identity politics—a politics without identity and an identity without politics:

1 One might read the lines: The inverse ratio of production costs in *some given instance of production* left the mannequin speechless when otherwise it would have continued speaking. But what is that instance? What is being made in that instance of production, that so startles the mannequin? Does the poem say?

These consumers in motion
have no name tags no ids
to drift off to dreamland
in a carnivalesque pitch
that cannot be notated (54)

The syntax wobbles at the first preposition in the third line, *to*: do consumers “drift off to dreamland” or are they not capable of it? The latter surprises. Nation-states shape the unconscious of their citizens.² To dream is to be already constituted by an imaginary community, these lines suggest: “dreamland” means first having “landed” somewhere, as citizen of some nation-state, with ID. These lines are taken from the sequence “A Walk on Granville Island.” Consumers “in motion,” buying products from around the world, forget their state of belonging, and therefore do not dream.

Lines from a second long sequence, “Viral Travels to Tokyo,” further assert that consumer and citizen are not exchangeable roles: “The dream augurs / as much as its lapses glitter with / the pride of ownership” (91). Commodity ownership obliterates “the dream.” But the dream’s value is up for grabs. In “Scoping,” “mannekins” “move” a customer who is personified as “the dream”:

The ripe fruit vegetables and
vintage wines in their [the mannekins’] adept
hands take place in the move

The dream in their presence
makes . . . (13)

Presumably, the move that the dream makes is to buy the fruit, vegetables and wine.

Mannequins—consumers—show incipient signs of thinking and feeling. Startlingly, they might also create the conditions for social change:

2 For an extreme but most revealing example, see Charlotte Beradt’s *The Third Reich of Dreams: Nightmares of a Nation, 1933–39*, dreams she collected at the time of people living through Hitler’s Germany. For an introduction to social dream theory, see Lawrence.

. . . led by the fierce tenacity
of a nose ever close to the window dressing

Balk if you will or if you don't show me a way
to chalk up the losses to the prescience of
the mannikin who leaps out of the frame
breaking the mould for the typecast role
as a hanger on or even a model minority
breaking the synergetic bonds wide open (20)

Today's "mannikin" is the historical product of a window dressing culture. The mannequin "who leaps out of the frame" is an agent of a dialectical reversal of the very culture that makes mannequin-as-consumer what it is, the prop of capital accumulation. Docile, willing, uncomplaining, and in these lines metaphorically figured as objective outcome of "model minority syndrome" (Miki *In Flux* 210), the mannequin is at the vanguard of window dressing culture *and* of that culture's downfall if and when it breaks out of "the typecast role." The social contradiction that the mannequin embodies, positing the window dressing culture that is a barrier to be broken, is how Marx characterized the force of revolution (as in revolving: bringing about its opposite condition) of the bourgeoisie.³ The mannequin is the new bourgeoisie.

That's now. So, what about the essence of the mannequin in a time before the inverse ratio, before the rise of the bourgeoisie? What kind of mannequin was it?

The marionette, the doll, the toy: one can trace varied cultural articulations and associations for these objects: Kleist takes up the marionette, Rilke, the doll, Baudelaire, the toy, for instance. Each presents a plausible pre-capitalist lineage for manufactured moulded plastic mannequins.

Marionettes, dolls, toys are common and can be cheaply crafted. Today, none has been rendered speechless by the inverse ratio—which is what the seventh couplet says happens ("the mannequin speechless for the first time"). The inverse

3 "But from the fact that capital posits every . . . limit as a barrier and hence gets *ideally* beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has *really* overcome it, and, since every such barrier contradicts its character, its production moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome but just as constantly posited" (Marx *Grundrisse* 410).

ratio has, today, on the contrary, made them into a million-plus commodities that talk—by Disney, Mattel, etc. Furthermore, the “carnavalesque pitch” of marionettes in particular

existed on the peripheries of sanctioned Culture. They were not admitted further; they occupied places in FAIR BOOTHS, suspicious MAGICIANS’ CHAMBERS, far from the splendid shrines of art, treated condescendingly as CURIOSITIES intended for the tastes of the masses. (Kantor 111)

So, I suggest (a bit hurriedly) that in order to find a suitable kind of speaking mannequin that predates the inverse ratio, we have to look elsewhere than to marionettes, dolls, and toys. The less obvious choice but the more pertinent one for the seventh couplet and for *MR* is the Noh mask and costume. The Noh drama was not common and it was not, I presume, cheap to make. Its masks and costumes never existed on a periphery of big-c Culture while big-c Culture was alive: Noh drama was the sanctioned Culture, restricted for centuries in the way it was made (generationally, by family guilds) and played (exclusively, to the imperial court of Japan).

Feudal Noh tradition and culture has the most to lose to the historical rise of capitalism’s inverse ratio. It’s why Fenollosa and Pound wanted to preserve this “drama of masks” (Pound 336).

Under the dominance of the inverse ratio, it is the masks and costumes of Noh drama that have been rendered “speechless for the first time” in centuries. Transformed by the inverse ratio into moulded plastic mannequins, they become the kitsch simulacra of a lost tradition.

Japan therefore seems crucial to understanding the gradual turning to economic language in Miki’s poetry. Many of *MR*’s poems reference Japan in some way, and while Miki’s other poetry books do as well, *MR* is the book to most directly address capitalism as a dominant transnational economic system. What has changed? While organized around Canada (the state, the national literature) and around critiques of its social and cultural policies, a breakthrough chapter in Miki’s *In Flux* (“Rewiring Critical Affects” 207–34) considers critical studies of post-war Japan. The emergence of a post-redress literature, one that investigates

previously-suppressed connections Canadians have to Japan, enables Miki to bring concepts he has developed of social justice and redress to bear on post-war Japan.

[T]he way in which the Japan government came to “embrace defeat” in response to the occupation produced the conditions that subsequently enabled it to evade not only taking responsibility for its wartime actions, but also to reconstruct the nation as peace-loving, democratic, and unique in being the first victims of the atomic bomb. It is as if, in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which led to the surrender on August 15, Japan was relieved of making amends for its own actions. (220–1)

In the language of the seventh couplet from “Scoping[s]” first poem, it is the inverse ratio—now in the guise of triumphal US-style capitalism—that reconstructed Japan after the war. The eponymous “rising” mannequin is attempting to articulate the price Japan has paid for dominance by and success due to the inverse ratio. The price paid for such enormous economic success is cultural homogeneity and memory-loss. Consumerism—shrines of consumption—would seem to be playing a determining role in the public forgetting. In this sense, the masks qua mannequins stand for unresolved redress of Japan’s imperialism.

MR’s poems do not distinguish between mannequins in Japan and Canada. MR would seem to link the unfolding of a post-redress identity in Canada to whether and how Japan reconciles itself with its past. In this sense, the Vancouver mannequins represent a blank question-mark of post-redress post-consumer identity.

In theatre director, artist and writer Tadeusz Kantor’s 1975 play, *The Dead Class*, twelve Old People wearing white masks and funeral suits behave “motionless like mannequins standing in the corner of a shop window or like the dead” (Kobialka in Kantor 323) until animated by their speaking fragments of memories and of lines (as if spoken through them) from Polish modernist theatre. In a theoretical statement about mannequins, “The Theatre of Death” (1975), Kantor explains how actors who are impersonally dressed as mannequins may allow audience members to face up to the faceless homogeneity in their lives. This, too, may

be a message of Roy Miki's latest poetry book, that readers directly face the apparent facelessness of consumption.

Note

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