

Producing ‘The Joy of Pret’: Theatres of (Emotional) Labour in the Service Industry

By Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal

Abstract

This article examines the demand for ‘authentic’ emotional performances from employees in service sector workplaces, considering the case of the coffee chain Pret A Manger in particular. Using interview data collected from current employees, alongside my own experiences as a customer in their stores, I show how the demand for what Arlie Hochschild terms ‘emotional labour’ is a cornerstone of Pret’s business model. Whilst employees are implored to ‘just be yourself’ in their interactions with customers, this demand is bound up with an anti-theatrical logic which posits emotional authenticity as something innate to the individual, whilst concealing the very nature of these performances as *work* which is directed and controlled by the employer. I argue that existing literature on these trends has tended to focus on individual performances and experiences, leading to a lack of consideration around the question of managerial and directorial control. I argue that a pivot should be made towards looking at the construction of these performances via directorial and managerial techniques, and furthermore that theatre and performance studies are disciplines well placed to make such contributions, through their interrogation of the notion of ‘authenticity’ in performance and through an increasing interest in questions of theatre and labour.

Emotional Labour at the ‘Happiness Factory’

It is lunchtime on Valentine’s Day 2019 and I walk into a central London branch of the coffee chain Pret a Manger. I approach the cashier, smiling and greeting her in a friendly manner, placing the wrap and chocolate bar I am purchasing on the counter. The cashier, a young woman, picks up my wrap, which is not labelled, turns it over, then over again. I step forward slightly to tell her which one it is. She thanks me and processes the rest of my order. As I am paying, she hands me a Pret ‘Love Bar’ from behind the counter, saying: ‘it’s on the house today’. I thank her and leave, feeling both surprised and grateful as a result of this gift. What I had just experienced was ‘The Joy of

Pret': the term used by the company to refer to its policy of mandating staff to give away a percentage of free food and drink to customers of their choosing each day. This policy, along with Pret's broader approach to customer service, has attracted significant attention in recent years from journalists offering inside accounts of Pret's 'happiness factory' (Moore), examinations of its attempts to 'love-bomb' customers (Noah), and even guides on how to access the elusive free coffees (Petter; Keller; Dalton).

These accounts and investigations of Pret's business practices are often framed by the concepts of emotional or affective labour, with Pret being cited as a paradigmatic example of companies who utilise employees' emotional capabilities and skills as part of the labour process (Myerscough; Noah). Whilst affective labour, most closely associated with theorists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, refers to all work which results in the production of affect rather than physical commodities, *emotional* labour, which I will primarily refer to in this article, refers to the role of emotion within the labour process itself. First coined by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her ground-breaking 1982 study *The Managed Heart*, emotional labour is defined as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (7). I argue that we can also understand emotional labour as work that requires certain characteristics or traits to be performed before an audience, and by adopting a theatrical lens to examine the business practices of companies such as Pret allows us to develop unique insights into these practices. Specifically in this article, I use Pret as an example of how theatricalisation of labour works in tandem with an explicit anti-theatricality to exploit the emotional skills and capabilities of employees, whilst simultaneously obscuring their connection to the relations of employment. I further argue that a focus on 'authenticity', in both the corporate literature and critical scholarship, diverts from the need to pay careful attention to how these theatricalised encounters are staged, managed, and directed from above.

Antitheatrical Behaviour

Founded in London in 1983, Pret a Manger now boasts over 500 global stores, more than 350 of which are in Britain. The chain, which generates a turnover of over £700 million a year, was sold in 2018 to investment group JAB Holdings for a reported £1.5 billion (Hurst and Onibudo)¹. On the British high street, Pret has become a ubiquitous presence across major cities, with a carefully constructed image emphasising a commitment towards ethical, organic, and vegetarian food, ongoing work with homeless charities, and the persistently friendly demeanour of their staff. The insistence on the latter point is reiterated in Pret's publicity but also through its recruitment process, training procedures, and management approach, and is even formalised in staff contracts. Alongside 'The Joy of Pret', the company uses a number of other tactics to ensure the friendly demeanour of staff, including the cultivation of a 'Pret Buzz', a specific type of friendly or welcoming atmosphere that each store must replicate through various means, and the use of Mystery Shoppers who arrive each week to monitor the performances of employees and penalise them if service is not fast, clean, or friendly enough. In a series of interviews², employees at Pret stores across London reiterated to me that providing authentic, 'genuinely happy' customer service was a necessary part of the job. One interviewee, reflecting on the recruitment process for the job and what managers looked for, stated '[i]t's more about your character, your type of person. Some people wasn't born to be serving people, but for some people...' while another told me, '[y]ou're not allowed to be scripted on till. You're not allowed. You can't be scripted. It's personality'. The experience of performing emotional labour is therefore intrinsic to work as an

¹ This research was conducted prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has subsequently resulted in major job losses and business closures across services and hospitality. In August 2020 Pret announced plans to cut 3,000 jobs and permanently close 30 stores nationally.

² I conducted a series of semi-structured in-person interviews with 13 Pret a Manger employees between 2018 and 2020, with the agreement of anonymity. I then cross-referenced this data, and used it in conjunction, with 70 anonymous employee reviews available on the website Glass Door.

employee of Pret.

One of the ways in which the company underline these expectations is through explicit directives surrounding behaviour. A previously published list of 'Pret Behaviours', cited in the London Review of Books (Myerscough), outlines a set of standard characteristics that employees are expected to exhibit, as well as those which are prohibited ('Pret Behaviors'). According to this document, the ideal Pret employee is 'genuinely friendly'; 'creates a sense of fun'; 'knows their audience'; and 'has presence'. Conversely, someone who 'does things only for show' is undesirable. The use of theatrical language in this document is positioned alongside the demand for authenticity—there is a clear performative imperative in the expectation to 'create' a certain atmosphere or 'presence', yet the requirement to know one's audience goes hand in hand with doing things out of a 'genuine' desire, and refusing any sense of 'show'. Of course, the formalisation of these behaviours in writing demonstrates that they are very much a requirement of the job.

Such theatrical metaphors, both implicit and explicit, as articulated through Pret's corporate literature and training are not uncommon within the hospitality sector. Danny Meyer, the hugely successful American restaurateur responsible for, amongst others, Union Square Café, Gramercy Tavern and the burger chain Shake Shack, has popularised this approach through his bestselling book *Setting the Table*, where he outlines his approach to 'enlightened hospitality', described as 'putting hospitality to work' (65). Meyer employs the theatrical metaphor when differentiating hospitality from service:

Service is the technical delivery of a product. Hospitality is how the delivery of that product makes its recipient feel [...] Service is a monologue – we decide how we want to do things and set our own standards for service. Hospitality, on the other hand, is a dialogue. (ibid.)

The 51% rule, another cornerstone of his approach, consists of placing majority emphasis on emotional job performance, with the remaining

49% focused on technical excellence and skills (141). Thus, in Meyer's approach, management and employees are encouraged to prioritise the emotional and affective elements of the job over more concrete physical skills or demands. More broadly, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's widely cited article and then book, *The Experience Economy*, explicitly advances this argument, urging managers to consider their businesses as a stage and think of work as theatre (156). The 'Pret Behaviours' exemplify expectations for workers across the service sector, where theatricalization of the workplace and the imperative to bring a performance of authenticity to work is now standard.

This focus on the authentic serves both a financial and ideological function. Positing the ability to provide genuine, happy service as innate to the employee means that they do not have to be trained in, or remunerated according to, the possession of emotional 'skill'. Emotional labour, in this context, is an invisible skill, rendered as something that is the employee's responsibility to carry and cultivate without direct influence from the employer. Simultaneously, the necessity of having these qualities means the employee is compelled to internalise the logic of the company, and subscribe to its mission as they commit their full 'authentic self' to the job.

Authenticity, Anti-Managerialism, and Anti-Theatricality

In an account of the spread of this discourse of authenticity in the modern workplace, Peter Fleming describes the evolution of what he terms 'just be yourself' management. He argues that managerial consultants, particularly in the contexts of the United States and the United Kingdom, now increasingly use authenticity as a reference point for understanding employee motivation and productive performance (2). Fleming characterises this philosophy as inherently contradictory, an attempt by management to solve perennial workplace tensions through an increasing reliance on the incorporation of 'non-work associations', such as markers of identity, lifestyle, or sexuality (7). Authenticity, as espoused by management, is then an attempt to 'solve the problem of

self-alienation and 'cure' the pathologies sustained by workers' as part of management's ongoing interest in 'reconciling the employee to the unpleasant reality of work' (Fleming 3). This management style, which encourages more of the employee's 'non-work existence' to be carried into the productive sphere, coincides with both an increasing demand for emotional labour and a workforce who are able and willing to put their own emotional management skills into the labour market.

While the exhortation to 'just be yourself' emphasises affect and solves some problems for management, it nevertheless creates others. For instance, staff performances require constant monitoring and adjustment—like being in a process of permanent rehearsal, with both colleagues and management providing notes. Whilst one Pret interviewee explained that employees should think of themselves almost as 'game show hosts', others drew attention to the careful balance required from their performances: 'there is such a thing as going too extreme with your customer service and personality' and 'if you're even too loud or too smiley or things, it's like oh this is over the top.' Employees described instances of being told, or telling others, to 'tone down' their showmanship, so the performance seemed more natural and improvised. This is also demonstrated by the banning of rote (scripted) phrases during service: employees must not say 'next please' to customers waiting in line, but choose between a variety of phrases such as 'can I help' or 'are you next'. One interviewee explained, 'you don't shout "next, next, next!" because it's not McDonalds. You don't shout "next!", So you say, "hi can I help?" or "is anybody waiting?" They're very specific. They don't want one word, "next, next".'

I will return to the question of management later on, but it is important to note the instability inherent in these performances, and the need to constantly re-establish the line of demarcation between a suitably authentic persona and an undesirably theatrical one, as articulated by the employees quoted above. Fleming refers to the tendency of 'just be yourself' management to adopt an 'anti-managerial' stance, whereby employees are encouraged to 'voice aspects of personhood once abnegated by corporate managerialism' (2). This

anti-managerialism, as I argue, is also indicative of an anti-theatrical stance which characterises the approach of Pret and other workplaces reliant on the discourse of authenticity. The attention placed on the authentic, genuine performance of selfhood—contrary to the rigid, or fake, ‘doing things only for show’ (‘Pret Behaviors’)—echoes Marvin Carlson’s claims about the negative attributes assigned to theatricality from the 1960s onwards. Carlson argues that theatricality and performance became counterposed as ‘rhetorically oppositional terms’, with performance seen in alignment with the ‘authentic’ or ‘meaningful’ self and theatricality with the artificial, or empty repetition (239-240). By considering the Pret behaviours cited earlier in this article, the effect of this binary framework becomes apparent; the persistent focus on authenticity serving to render explicitly ‘theatrical’ forms of behaviour as unwanted, and demonstrative of artifice.

Nicholas Ridout reaffirms this tendency to bifurcate theatricality and performance in his own account of antitheatricality: ‘[t]heatre is guilty, and knows it, while performance still makes some claim to innocence’ (*Stage Fright* 4). Ridout argues that performance, far from being ‘the paradigm of authentic self-expression’ is in fact ‘an exemplary commodity (it commodifies action, not just things)’ (‘Performance in the Service Economy’ 131), and elsewhere argues that theatre itself is positioned very much within ‘industry’ and capitalist relations, rather than outside of them (cf. *Passionate Amateurs* 6). Theatre offers an experience of work ‘that is not normally experienced as work, but as some kind of nonwork or ‘play’’ (*Passionate Amateurs* 8-9). The integration of non-work elements—such as ‘fun’—and self-identity within the theatricalised service space mirror the same condition. As Fleming notes, ‘the promotion of fun relies upon a symbolic blurring between life and work since the aim is to make the act of production feel as if it is not work at all’ (64). Businesses such as Pret deliberately integrate playful elements (indeed the articles offering tips on how to get free coffee suggest customers are highly engaged in the ‘game’ offered by ‘The Joy Of Pret’). But more crucially, they appeal to employees to willingly bring their genuine, fun, lively personalities

to work also aims to conceal the nature of this practice *as* work, which echoes Ridout's description of theatre as work that strives to be experienced as 'play' instead. Antitheatricity, in this context, works to obscure the social relations of work itself and assist in perpetuating what Fleming identifies as the 'instrumental discourse' of authenticity (5).

Ridout's conclusions about our understanding of theatre as part of the 'real' world of capitalist relations, rather than outside of them, have implications for our understanding of the theatre of labour across commercial stages such as Pret. The theatrical metaphor, which pervades corporate literature for training and publicity as cited earlier, also persists within critical scholarship which examines these business practices. Hochschild's thesis for emotional labour deploys Stanislavskian concepts within her notions of 'deep' and 'surface' acting, arguing that these represent the two strategies available to workers dealing with the emotional pressures of service industry jobs (35). Elsewhere, the dramaturgical model of Erving Goffman is widely cited in studies that attempt to use a theatrical framework for analysing the workplace (Guerrier and Adib 1409; Weaver 8; Lugosi 145; Erickson 88), and autonomist theorists including Paulo Virno have used the performance artist as a reference point for their writing on contemporary labour (cf. 68). In many of these comparisons, however, the actor's labour is cited as a metaphor or merely a symbolic referent for discussions of contemporary work rather than an example in itself. Hochschild, for example, frequently reminds her reader that although she draws heavily from Konstantin Stanislavski, his ideas of theatrical labour is qualitatively different from the forms of commercial emotional labour with which her study is concerned: '[w]e do not think twice about the use of feeling in the theatre, or in psychotherapy, or in forms of group life that we admire' (12) she writes, adding that 'in the world of the theatre it is an honourable art to make maximum use of the resources of memory and feeling in stage performance' (37). Goffman, as Anthony Giddens highlights, also goes to lengths to make clear his dramaturgical model is simply one possible perspective, with its

own limitations (Giddens 291). Like Hochschild, Giddens argues, Goffman counterposes the 'real' of everyday life, to the make-believe and rehearsed theatrical performance (ibid). This distinction between the 'make-believe' of the actor on stage, and the 'real' performative demands of people in the workplace means that this scholarship often risks adhering to the same essentialising tendencies which we see in the corporate literature. An often uncritical adoption of the theatrical metaphor, as seen in Hochschild and Goffman, in which the actor is seen as a figure with unique access to inner emotional authenticity, allows the very notion of this inner authentic self to escape scepticism, as critics have noted. Kathi Weeks has cautioned the need to remember that emotional labour is not only about 'seeming to be but also about his or her coming to be; the work requires not just the use but the production of subjectivity' (241). Elsewhere Guerrier and Adib have noted that the very notion of an 'authentic self' is 'a part of late modern, Western, social discourses' (1401). Examining the theatricalised elements of these labour processes in greater depth than previous scholarship has done, thus allows me to challenge, rather than reinforce, the essentialising notions of authenticity which underpin many of these businesses practices.

Centralisation of Gift-Giving

I have argued that the theatricalisation of labour on display in workplaces such as Pret exists alongside an anti-theatricality, which operates both to naturalise performances which are, in fact, directed and managed according to the company and to mask the skill involved in the work. Those scholars and writers who are interested in close examination of these workplaces can all too easily contribute to the same instrumentalisation, which Fleming identifies, through the rendering of the performative aspects of this labour as something other than work itself. In these examples, the actor's skill is demonstrative of the ability to access inner authenticity. However, I would propose another reading, one which suggests that both employee and actor are in fact engaging

in a more complex process of defining and shaping what constitutes the acceptable public representation of authentic emotional expression. Adopting approaches from theatre and performance studies illuminates some of these issues. As Richard Schechner writes, a performative framework

makes it increasingly difficult to sustain a distinction between appearances and reality, facts and make-believe, surfaces and depths. Appearances are actualities – neither more nor less so than what lies behind or beneath appearances. Social reality is constructed through and through. (19)

Performances at work, in the style of ‘just be yourself’ management, are not the same as life outside of the workplace—they are skilled performances that deserve to be recognised and remunerated as such—but they are no less our social reality by virtue of being performance. Patrick McKelvey, similarly, in a recent piece, refers to *The Managed Heart* to argue that whilst Hochschild may invoke theatre workers ‘only to exclude them’, theatre scholars might find ‘opportunities for critically engaging, or even contesting, the market’s absorption of affect’ through the study of theatrical labour (86). I also suggest that adopting the theatrical lens, and the example of theatrical labour specifically, can offer us further insight, not only into the experience of performing these working personas, but also of the tactics and methods used to elicit them. To consider this further, let me return to the Valentine’s day encounter at Pret outlined at the beginning of this article, which resulted in a free ‘Love Bar’.

As I walk down the street after receiving my free ‘Love Bar’, I begin to question why the cashier offered me the bar, rethinking and retracing each step of the interaction. I initially decided it must be because I assisted her with the name of the sandwich I had chosen. Pret do not label their food products, staff must memorise each item and be able to identify it on sight alone. Helping her with this repetitive and difficult part of her job might have resulted in her giving me something for free. As I cross the road however, I suddenly become aware of the

earrings, in the shape of the heart eyes emoji, which I am wearing, and remember the date. It occurs to me that perhaps she gave me the 'love' bar because it is Valentine's Day and I am wearing something appropriate. I am aware, as a result of my interviews, that Pret regularly assign promotions for particular holidays or events, rewarding customers who are dressed or behave accordingly. Was the free bar the result of my earrings adhering to the Valentine's theme? As I reach my building, doubt begins to set in. I remind myself that I had already bought a chocolate bar as part of my purchase. Why would the cashier give me a second bar, rather than just waive the cost of the one I had picked myself, as I know she had the freedom to do under 'The Joy of Pret' initiative? Why did she have a Love bar on hand behind the counter? As I sit down at my computer, a woman in my postgraduate office turns around and announces to the room 'Pret are giving away a free Love Bar to everyone who pays with a Monzo card today'. I don't have a Monzo card, but I now have a Pret Love Bar. After some momentary confusion I find myself pleased. Perhaps, unlike other customers who have been given a bar because they met the criteria for this particular promotion, I was gifted it for some other reason – be it helping with the product name or the earrings. I begin to think that, unlike the other customer, I was gifted mine because of something I must have done, individually, to warrant it. I feel my love bar is perhaps more deserved, the offering more genuine, the gift more meaningful.

Some months later I have another encounter at Pret which sheds new light on my Valentine's day transaction and highlights why attempts to understand emotional labour exclusively through the framework of personal authenticity fall short. In celebration of 'National Croissant Day', Pret announce across their social media channels that customers visiting between 3pm and 4pm will be given a free vegan jam croissant, as long as they say the password 'Wham Bam Thank You Jam'. At 3.05pm, I enter my nearest Pret, a central London branch, where the line is already some thirty people deep. At the front of the queue, staff are handing out croissants in paper bags to customers, without the password being stated or any verbal interaction taking

place. Eventually, the supply of fresh croissants finishes. A member of staff announces this to the whole store, encouraging us to leave. In the interests of research, I approach the counter regardless and ask if they anticipate making any more. Yes, he says, in about ten minutes. I wait, while a queue forms again behind me. When the majority of customers have given up and left, the staff member again makes an announcement, this time to say there will be precisely eighteen croissants available, the remaining stock, and that customers should count themselves – the nineteenth person in line and everyone behind them being told to leave. The customers oblige, and those of us left are shortly given our croissants. Again, no password is spoken, and little interaction takes place except the passing of the bag.

The centralisation of these offers, with the 'gift' being ordered by head office rather than offered by individual employees, blunts the potential for any 'authentic' display of gift giving management may aspire to as well as disrupting the theatricality of the exchange. In stores that are busy, staff cannot cope with the demand from customers who have seen the promotion announced online and begun to descend in numbers. As a result, staff break from the script, dispensing with key elements (such as the password), in order to alleviate the pressure. Looking back to Valentine's day, it becomes apparent to me that, just as the password, which was never required, the actual display of a Monzo card was probably disregarded by employees in an attempt to speed up the queue and make their day easier. Simply handing a bar to everyone, regardless of their adherence to the promotional 'rules', was a preferable way to manage what had been imposed upon them. This stands in contrast to the 'gift giving' espoused by the Joy of Pret philosophy, which is supposed to involve commitment and choice on the part of the employee. In centralising and standardising these processes, Pret can no longer guarantee they function in the way envisioned. And in the process, they expose the theatricality of their set up.

Conclusion

I have argued that scholarship on emotional labour has tended towards

a preoccupation with the question of authenticity, often articulated through the symbolic referent of the actor. This presents two problems for research. Firstly, such a focus can recreate, rather than question, the very notion of an 'authentic' self which underpins corporate attempts to valorise and commodify employees emotional faculties. Secondly, a preoccupation with how authentic, or not, performances at work may be obscures the managerial and directorial dimensions of work. Theatre and performance studies are particularly well placed to address these problems. As disciplines with particular interest in how exterior emotional performances and representations have been shaped throughout history, theatre and performance are well placed to interrogate notions of 'authentic' performances and how these are constructed under varying contexts and conditions. Additionally, thinking about theatrical labour itself, as labour, can be usefully brought into dialogue with the study of such business practice to help move beyond an individualising framework. As my own account illustrates, any discussion of the authenticity, or not, of the employee's feelings in instances of emotional labour becomes secondary to the pressure and control exerted by a management concerned with the careful cultivation of brand image. This draws attention to the inadequacy of any theorisation of emotional labour which is focused primarily on individual experience, rather than considering the workplace as a whole within a larger economic and political context. My experiences and conducted interviews additionally demonstrate the need for labour relations to be foregrounded in scholarship on these issues. My arguments join theatre and performance scholars, including Ridout, McKenzie and others, who have already begun to do this through their work on theatre and labour.

In this article, I adopted an approach of paying specific attention to the application of theatricality in the workplace to show the ways it assists employers to obscure employment relations, allowing them to exploit the emotional capabilities of employees through the use of naturalising tropes around behaviour and personality. Emotional labour at Pret and other workplaces is not solely the result of employees'

individual strategies and techniques for emotion work, but is also the result of the deliberate imposition and management of directorial techniques that cultivate and encourage the types of ‘acting’ required. What we see in the examples I have explored is not the emotional labourer as autonomous actor, but the role of the *director*, through the intervention of management. By indulging Pret’s antitheatricality, we also indulge their anti-managerialism. I drew the curtain on these theatricalised labour processes in order to expose the direction of the encounters, as well as the skills necessary to their performance.

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