From Event to Extreme Reality

The Aesthetic of Shock

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translated by Leslie Wickes

The theatrical stage has always oscillated between immediacy and mediation, between reality and fiction. This is not to say that there is a principle of exclusion between these two polarities; at best there is a gradation, a balance, perhaps even a complementary relationship. Numerous performances draw upon this balance for their power, and it also provides the clearest method of determining the originality of a particular artistic practice when compared to another.¹

However, we live in an era where many directors and artists in all disciplines seek to move beyond representation by bringing reality onto the stage, by creating an event, by introducing the spectacular. These forms call upon a stage presence that abruptly seizes on the audience and violently affects them. The originality of certain of the most interesting and innovative artistic forms lies in working specifically with the breach between the real and the theatrical, the representative and the immediate (which takes priority), the illusion and the unmediated event.

¹. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the “Theatrical Knowledge and Performance” colloquium [Savoirs et Performance Spectaculaire] (Brussels, 23–24 April 2010). The French version of this text will appear in the colloquium proceedings (2011).

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Of course, the shows of Jan Lauwers come to mind, with his dancing and singing actors (notably Benoît Gob at the beginning of *Isabella’s Room* [2004]), but also those of Romeo Castellucci (particularly *Inferno* [2001], where in the play’s opening scene Romeo is assaulted by trained attack dogs, or the mountain climber who nimbly climbs the walls of the Palais des Papes in Avignon, keeping the audience in suspense for more than half an hour).

To these more and more common onstage examples, one can add examples of a different nature that nevertheless create “real” events within a play, as when Alain Platel brings a blind man onstage to walk a beam over a void in *Allemaal Indian* (1999), or even Pippo Delbono, whose actors Bobo, who is mute and deaf, Gianluca, who has trisomy 21 (Down syndrome), and Nelson, a formerly homeless man, bring their physical limitations onto the stage. The company Hotel Pro Forma presented a similar case (though of a different variety) 20 years ago when they used actors with actual dwarfism in their adaptation of *Snow White*. The actors often departed from the Grimm fairy tale in order to explain, without pathos, the realities of life as a little person.

I would like to focus on one particular form of the emergence of the real onstage: the presentation of exceptionally violent, extreme scenes, which are easily located because of the shockwave they create within various artistic forms, including theatre, cinema, visual arts, and performance. My theory is that these scenes bring art, particularly theatrical art, out of its theatrical framework to create the event, in truth, the spectacular, onstage by substituting a violent performativity accompanied by a sense of extreme presence identical to that experienced when faced with a real event.

This violence is not a new phenomenon. It has been present in performance since the 1960s, but recently it seems to have reemerged in a new way. Where once the forms of stage violence aimed at bringing an absolute presence to the stage and at reexamining the question of representation, today violent scenes seem to try and establish a new method of soliciting the spectator. This method contravenes all uses, defies censorship, and delivers heavy blows to the spectator. What do such scenes offer in terms of finality? What kind of aesthetic do they establish? What relationship do they have to representation onstage? What perceptual strategies do they put in place? I would like to provisionally call this the aesthetic of shock, borrowing and slightly modifying Paul Ardenne’s phrasing in his book *Extrême: Esthétiques de la Limite Dépassée* (Extreme: The Aesthetics of Breaking Boundaries) (2006), which speaks of a shock aesthetic. I will begin with a few examples, chosen from various artistic fields (theatre, cinema, visual arts, and performance) in order to analyze their outlines and examine what they reveal about this very unusual relationship to the real and the links they have to theatricality and performativity.

The first example is the least violent. *Rwanda 94* is a six-hour play known throughout the theatrical world that borrows from different aesthetic forms (oratory, testimony, documentary, conference, fiction). It was staged in 2000 by Jacques Delcuvellerie after a very long period of research on the Rwandan genocide. I want to pay particular attention to the insertion of a documentary film excerpt within the play. This film shows thousands of deaths caused by the genocide and all the violent acts that the event led to. One scene, just a few seconds long and shot from a distance, is particularly violent: the execution of a Tutsi rebel, performed with a machete.3

It is a slice of reality imported “as is” into the theatrical framework, but the image is mediated. However, the cinematic frame, itself within the frame of the play, is unable to entirely erase the horror of the act happening before our very eyes. The action projected on the screen

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2. Jacques Delcuvellerie is a French director who settled in Belgium. He founded the GROUPOV in 1980 and has directed it ever since.

3. One could also add the true firsthand account of Yolande Mukagasana, a survivor of the genocide, who tells the story of the deaths of her three children and her subsequent escape in the opening of the film.
is so violent in what it evokes that it possesses additional presence, causing the spectators to move outside of their usual comfort range. Despite all of the fictional apparatus that precedes and follows the film, this reality hits the audience like a brick, jarring their sensibilities to such a point that it eradicates aesthetic distance, leaving only the event. It is a reality whose violence the spectator confronts face to face.

In the process, the spectators’ gazes and their entire bodies are engrossed, caught up in the horror. Thus, with each new viewing, this execution of a human being in all its violence is replayed, along with the shock of the spectators’ experience. Yet this shock is simultaneously tied to empathy for the victim, consternation at human barbarity: repulsion and rejection when faced with the act committed, but also incredulity. Are they really reading these images correctly? Their imaginations easily fill in any flaws in the images, which were taken from very far away and appear as if there is a mist between the onlooker and the action.

Several questions arise from this first example: What changes are occurring in theatre with respect to the phenomena of theatricality and performativity? In what terms can we analyze the action? Is this really a case of moving beyond the framework of the stage?

4. I would like to add one important peripheral detail that demonstrates that the screening of such scenes must be done with caution in an artistic context. In effect, when it was shown at the opening of the August 2001 IFTR (Fédération Internationale pour la Recherche Théâtrale) conference Transactions: Culture and Performance, held in Sydney, Australia, this scene provoked a hostile reaction among participants who felt violated. This reminds us of the necessity of framing the event, as the framework was found to be insufficient by certain audience members. One might question the reasons behind the impossibility of absorbing reality in all its violence experienced by the spectators, when television screens incessantly present us with scenes of death (see the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan). What makes such scenes “unwatchable” and quasi-obscene in the context of spectacle when they are rendered mundane in the media?
This engrossment of the gaze necessarily eradicates theatrical distance, a distance which, as I mentioned earlier, is necessary to the recognition of theatricality. All that remains is the performativity of the action, a performativity that goes hand in hand with the emergence of the event.

When they occur, these moments indicate a rupture, whether violent or not, that suspends the representation in order to allow the factual, and thus the present, to emerge onstage. They create an event. The stage suddenly loses the play of illusion, of the appearance, of the as if, and the spectators find themselves face to face with a reality that has emerged where they least expected it, a reality that modifies their initial contract, once implicit, surrounding the representation. This implicit contract states that the characters have to remain as they were when the play started; they have to keep their physical “integrity.” This is the difference between performance art and theatre.

It is in these terms that the theatrical event can be defined. It appears as a moment that surprises the spectators and causes the real to emerge onstage outside of any process of representation, illusion, or stage fiction. This event—which, in its more extreme forms, can stage uncensored deaths (of animals, of humans) in various ways—seizes upon the spectators’ senses and addresses itself directly to their emotions, creating a quasi immersion in the action that prevents all critical distance. The spectators find themselves, if only for a few moments, constrained by the event itself and forced into renouncing the “suspension of disbelief” that theatrical research and theories of communication have defined as the basis of the credulity necessary to theatrical action.

To put it differently, one might say that a theatrical event is the moment when the theatrical illusion is interrupted and the stage is shaped by an action that emerges without mediation (but not without a frame), leaving room for chance or risk.

Of course, the unexpected and unforeseen emergence of the real onstage can be of a different nature and have varying effects on the spectators according to the intensity of its emergence and the nature of the action. In all these cases, the tacit contract initially existing between the artist and the spectators seems to suddenly disintegrate and the spectators find themselves forcibly propelled into a reality that seems to extend beyond the frame of the stage.

Paul Ardenne named this phenomenon, which was abundantly used in the performance art of the 1970s, extreme art. It is the staging of another’s death, which, much like in the Roman arena, elicits a voyeuristic fascination in the audience’s gaze that thus externalizes their own relationship to the void and the violence that inhabits it.

Of course, by creating the event onstage, this recourse to the real emerges as the way to circumvent theatrical illusion and representation, to instead elicit an immediate presence that eliminates the mediation of a story or a dialogue spoken by an actor; it also eliminates illusion of any sort. The thinking that guides this practice is, of course, one of many lines of thought engendered by a dialogue on the reexamination of representation that has been extensively analyzed by Jacques Derrida and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.

There is a genuine rupture in the order of the performance that accounts for the spectators’ surprise at having to change their perceptual register in order to be in sync with what they are presented with. They exit fiction in order to enter reality.

Moving beyond narration, breaking the theatrical illusion, the event creates an eruption in the course of the spectacle, taking the spectators by surprise and forcing them into a mode of

5. This procedure is not new in itself. In the past, such companies as the Living Theatre or Boal’s “invisible theatre” troupes made abundant use of this method. More recently, companies like Fura dels Baus and Hotel Pro Forma and directors such as Victor García, Jan Lauwers, Alain Platel, Pippo Delbono, Romeo Castellucci, Christoph Marthaler, and Heiner Goebbels have all used this process. However, their objectives, and the effects they obtain, are entirely different from the effects obtained here because they are not evoking death, whether the death of humans or of animals, through violence.
6. I believe that in certain cases, particularly those I mention here, it is incorrect to say that the action has no referent outside of the present moment. In effect, in the given examples, even if we are plunged into reality and death is being directly experienced, even if the performativity of the moment dominates the artistic framework, they find themselves removed from the temporality of the performance and immersed in another time, an “other” time, as if frozen in place.

The spectators’ attention is constrained; their senses are brutally assaulted, forcing them to follow the action without any distance, without the possibility of seeing an aesthetic dimension to it.

The emergence of this event at the very core of the performance could be explained by the brutal suppression of the theatrical framing that defines (and protects) the actor, and by the sudden immersion of the actor in an action that is completely outside of all representation. In Schechnerian terms, one might call it a performative action.

The first effect of this emergence of reality is to surprise the spectators and modify their gaze and the tacit contract, once traditionally ensconced, that guarantees a show as a place of play and illusion. However, if this is truly a characteristic of current theatre, a theatre inherited from the wave of performance art in the 1960s, and the confluent influences of Artaud, the Living Theatre, and Grotowski that still affect the stage, it is the quality that illuminates how numerous current theatrical experiences have effectively divested themselves of any relationship to representation, illusion, story, and sometimes even performance itself.

The second effect is clearly the absence of referents. It is true that spectators, fascinated by the violence of the action, the risk that the artist voluntarily undergoes, and the real danger that threatens, try to distinguish between what has been planned and controlled and the ever-present possibility of accident. They are carried away by the potential of the action’s immediacy and its extreme presence. These performative moments most often operate at the limits of the symbolic, in the purely factual.6

Yet, despite the autonomy of the event (even when planned), despite the emergence of reality onstage, this does not negate theatricality. In effect, the spectators have never moved beyond the theatrical frame. It remains, limiting and enclosing them. It is this framing that gives the event meaning, and that makes it even possible to view it as a work of art. Thus, theatricality has never truly disappeared from the process. It remains as an indispensable framing device. It makes what is offered to the gaze visible. In the absence of this frame, we would find ourselves in pure performativity, and thus as absorbed by the action as we would be by the real, without critical distance. However, a work of art requires precisely this distance provided by theatricality.

This means that in theatre, onstage — whether this is in a theatrical venue or a public space — all performative action calls upon theatricality.7 Theatricality is what gives it meaning and inscribes it within the symbolic. It is also what gives it its aesthetic dimension. The work may, of course, strive to erode this theatricality and try to eradicate it. The work may explore its confines, its limits, but theatricality endures, like the phoenix rising from its own ashes. It
is only because of the pervasiveness of theatricality that the spectators remain in their seats, impassive, regardless of what occurs, and that they are willing to observe these works, as brutal as they are, and consent to consider them as works of art.

Any theatrical frame reestablishes the theatricality of performative action in its entirety. In fact, theatricality has never quit the stage. It is what makes performativity identifiable in artistic and aesthetic terms; otherwise the spectators would find themselves in the purely factual.

However, this aesthetic frame is problematic in that the artistic envelope causes the event to lose some of its acuity. For instance, an initial analysis illuminates the fact that even if the Hutu rebel completes an action, if the film “shows the doing,” as Richard Schechner puts it (2002:22), the spectators cannot help but plunge into the performativity of the action occurring before their eyes. But to recognize this performativity, to give it a name, is to implicitly frame the scene and introduce a distance between the spectators and the object of their gaze. In other words, the performativity of a theatrical action can only be read on the basis of theatricality, because it is theatricality that creates the framework necessary to recognize the artistic and aesthetic dimension of the scene. Michael Fried thoroughly understood this (see Fried 1980). Thus, as we have established elsewhere, this theatricality creates a rift between reality and “fiction.” To do this is, at the very least, to play with, and at most, to totally erase the murder thus presented, leaving only the accomplished action without any consideration of the “actors.”

In effect, as I previously noted, to recognize the performativity of action — and consequently, its theatricality, because the two go hand in hand — is to create the cleavage between reality and fiction that I discussed earlier. Theatricality, by its very nature, necessarily inscribes a cleavage in space and time, creating a schism in continuity. It designates the space and time as different from those of the spectator, while performativity draws the spectator into the action to enter into its space and temporality. Theatricality calls up a different space and time and designates it as the space of the “other.” This space can be preexisting and programmed (theatrical frame) or deliberately called up by the spectators’ gaze. In theatricality, it is a question of recognizing the “otherness” of the other as understood by the spectators’ gaze; in performativity, the spectators are absorbed within the action and are in the absolute presence of the event, including its time and space. This is the fundamental difference. Performativity needs the other, so to speak.

Things occur differently on reality’s stage, a stage that is fixed in the real. Spectators are in the space of the other, linked to the performer in a quasi fusion; they are absorbed, hypnotized by the action taking place. Each microsequence of events garners their complete attention. Thus, they are not in a position of aesthetic distance, judgment, or analysis. They themselves are within the process, within the performativity of the action and the moment. Like the performer, the spectators are at the heart of the action. Any distance evaporates. They are within the intimacy of each microaction.

This theatricality of action is the essential requirement for locating performativity within the artistic context, whatever it may be (theatrical, choreographic, media, pictorial, or cinematic). Yet placing theatricality at the center of a particularly violent event is somewhat problematic, because it makes the death of another into a quasi-insignificant consideration by reducing it to an element of the spectacle. It diminishes the other to the role of an object, a mere pawn in service of the aesthetic work. Thus, it abstracts the individual in order to benefit the work. Isn’t there something obscene about using such moments to generate theatricality? Answering this question necessitates a departure from the aesthetic domain in order to enter into considerations that, if not ethical, are at least moral.

In his book, Extrême: Esthétiques de la Limite Dépassée, Paul Ardenne observes that the question this raises is how to “reread the image of brutal reality” and what art can bring to it with-

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8. But they can also choose to remain outside of the action by deciding to observe it with indifference.
9. All translations from this book, unless otherwise indicated, are my own. — Trans.
out necessarily falling into a disdain for the subject (2006:318). In effect, to consider these images or moments as works of art is to remain silent in the face of thousands of deaths. It is to divide oneself from the very violence of the action presented as well as its meaning. As Ardenne says, it is to remain on the outside while humiliating the victims: “The direct observation offered by the image humiliates the victim, aestheticizes the sacrifice, or never fully conveys their suffering beyond the visible” (388). The second example shifts the question to the field of cinema and takes it even further. It is Patricio Guzman’s 1975 film La Batalla de Chile: la lucha de un pueblo sin armas¹⁰ (The Battle of Chile: The Struggle of a City without Arms). First mentioned by Emilie Houssa in her dissertation (2011), the film’s original objective was to show the different stages of the Chilean popular revolution. Guzman wanted to document the resistance among the Chilean bourgeoisie seeking to maintain their privilege. Guzman writes: “At the time, I wanted to show the anonymous faces, the millions of sympathizers and militants engaged in the political turmoil” (Guzman n.d.).

However, after several months of filming, he realized that he was not filming the Chilean revolution as he intended, but rather the counterrevolution driven by a faction of the army supported by the United States. This counterrevolution would lead to Pinochet’s dictatorship. Within this documentary that recounts, among other things, the events of 29 June 1973, Guzman incorporates a section of raw footage shot by his young cameraman, Jorge Muller Silva, who died before Guzman’s eyes as he filmed it, mortally wounded by a soldier’s bullet. Silva’s camera films his assassin as well as his own death. Consequently, the spectators directly witness the cameraman’s death through his lens. We do not see the cameraman fall. We only perceive the effect through the image the cameraman sees before he falls. In other words, Jorge Muller Silva’s camera films the soldier aiming at him, and then the image flickers. The screen goes black. The camera goes out. These few seconds are weighted with emotion. We never see the cameraman behind the lens, but we sense his presence by the direct effect. This is a depiction of a man’s death.

It goes without saying that the image has an emotional impact for the spectator as well as the director who chose to keep it in the film. Strictly speaking, there is no representation of the event, but the cameraman’s death is metonymically evoked in the fade to black and in the information the spectators receive just prior to it. For a few moments the audience leaves the documentary distance behind in order to plunge into the event, the sudden emergence of reality

¹⁰ The film is in three parts: La insurrección de la burguesía, 1975; El golpe de estado, 1977; El poder popular, 1979.
that, as in Rwanda 94, evokes the end of a human life. The narrative, archival, and documentary framework dissolves. Representation is no longer predominant. For a few moments, we are no longer in simple documentary. The scene produces an intense presence effect. Then the story resumes and the spectators recover the distance imposed by film on the transmission of information.

In contrast to Rwanda 94, in this case we are within a genre — documentary — that not only permits the emergence of reality onstage, but that essentially is constructed from scenes drawn from reality, because the images that make up the film reconstruct various moments of reality itself. However the violence of this death jars the spectators and draws them out of the artistic framework that allows for a certain form of critical distance. The death of young Jorge Muller Silva is replayed without abridgement as if, with each screening, it occurs anew for the spectators, preventing them from seeking refuge in an illusory representation. As in the previous example, this emergence of the present that interrupts the representation interpellates us in the respect that the violence of the image seems to suddenly burst the boundaries of the artistic and aesthetic frame, leaving only the pervasiveness of the real. The performativity of the event is manifested through this means. The question that arises: Has the theatricality really been erased?

Let us say that, far from ceding its rights, representation remains. The film demands it. Although the death is shown unabridged, with no apparent distance between the spectators and the event, the thin layer of film slides between them, bringing an artistic, documentary framework that is also theatrical. In effect, even though the image has caused the event to emerge into the spectators’ present for a fraction of a second, the representation of the young cameraman’s death is only suspended for a moment, and quickly reclaims its dominion. The spectators remain in the position of voyeurs faced with a work. It is this recognition of the theatricality of the scene that ensures the aesthetic component.

A third example is borrowed from the field of visual arts. It is an exhibition at Beaubourg by Huang Yong Ping, a Franco-Chinese artist. The artist wanted to exhibit a vivarium as a work of art in the 1994 Hors Limites (Beyond Borders) exhibition. Huang Yong Ping’s work, entitled Théâtre du Monde (Theatre of the World), placed grasshoppers, cockroaches, tarantulas, millipedes, lizards, skinks, and scorpions under a dome shaped like a turtle’s shell. According to the commissioners of the exhibition, this work represents “a microcosm of global conflicts” and “incites people to serious reflection on the dynamics of power in contemporary society” (Aujourd’hui la Chine 2007).

Banned from the Pompidou Centre, this scandalous work was also turned away from a Vancouver art gallery for ethical reasons (cruelty to animals), following a complaint by the SPCA due to the fact that the work placed animals that prey on each other into the same envi-

11. It would also be possible here to discuss the well-known performances of Chris Burden and Serge Oldenbourg, who both play with the idea of their own deaths, framing them with a staging where risk flirts with death. The most striking examples are Burden’s Shoot (1971) and Oldenbourg’s Solo pour la Mort (Solo for Death; 1964). In Shoot, Burden asks his assistant to shoot him in the arm with a .22 calibre long rifle; in Solo pour la Mort, Oldenbourg plays Russian roulette with a revolver in front of an audience. Of course, Serge Oldenbourg’s action in actually playing Russian roulette in front of 400 spectators gathered in the Expression Libre gallery is more extreme than that of Chris Burden, who, one imagines, chose a friend who was a good shot, or the action of Franko B in pushing the boundaries of sacrifice to the point of symbolically opening his own veins. In the case of Burden, it is a question of assumed risk; in that of Oldenbourg, it is a deadly game where it is understood that death can intervene unexpectedly. In both cases, the spectators are confronted with an experience at the limits (and of the limits). Such performances overturn the balance of representation, jar the spectators and shake their perceptual habits. Yet paradoxically, Paul Ardenne claims that the artistic work limits this, causing such performances to lose some of their extreme nature through the very fact of being representations (2006:57).
ronment. The particular interest of this example does not come from the nature of the work itself, because the various creatures forced to coexist are subject to an experience that echoes their actual living conditions in nature, though one might object that in nature, they are not trapped in a confined space and have the very real possibility of escape.

Violent though the work may be, it is not substantially different from the cockfights commonly held in certain parts of the world, or even from the bullfights that are a national sport in several Latin countries. The violence of the work comes rather from the fact that it is presented as a work of art, and thus acquires a legitimacy that leaves only its representative, symbolic value. However, in contrast to the two previous examples, in this case the work is located firmly within reality and carries “eventhood” within it. The creatures’ violent acts towards each other, made theatrical in this format, occur before the audience: the animals devour each other, deaths occur, and the aghast, uncomfortable spectators witness a work that simultaneously strikes and violates them.

Must they necessarily see it as a work of art? This is the question. To what degree does the presence of an audience legitimize the kind of practices that transform real violence into an object of representation? Can the spectator move beyond the action occurring before their eyes? Is there not an obscenity in thus endorsing certain forms of gratuitousness onstage?

This question was already raised in the 1960s, but it seems that this new form of violence as spectacle is more twisted in the respect that the issue of stage presence (which once legitimized this type of practice) is not even raised here. The artist does not construct the work out of concern for reality. The work is directly inscribed within representation, inviting the spectators to follow it into the reality that obliterates its initial violence, allowing it to be read as an entirely symbolic violence. The violence only exists as a metaphor for the violence of the world. The work has become tautological, and is intended to allow the spectators to deal with the effective violence of the action occurring before their eyes.

If there is truly performativity of the action, we are within our rights to ask ourselves, where is the work’s theatricality? In order to see it, we need that distance that places artistic works outside of pure “eventhood” and gives them another meaning that obliterates the effective nature of the action taking place. Everything is possible in the name of art. This is what the performance art of the 1960s has already established.

Paul Ardenne has thoroughly and quite correctly analyzed the nature of the gaze we bring to bear on this type of so-called extreme performace. He affirms that these performances are based on unfamiliarity (scenes that are beyond what we are accustomed to seeing); repulsion (what is shown is something that we would ordinarily refuse to view, that we don’t want to see); the desire to be confronted with content that we usually avoid but that we want to see, even as we want to avoid it; extravagance (the gaze wants to encounter something that is entirely other, a radically other performance); and exteriority (a fundamental element, according to Ardenne). He terms it shock aesthetic (2006:376), meaning an aesthetic that is supposed to have the power to simultaneously liberate and inhibit:

In principle, pleasure frees us from trauma. By enjoying myself, I take revenge on frustration; with the same stroke I make fantasy tangible and eradicate it. [...] Confronting an
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extreme image is both liberating and inhibiting, it becomes a traumatic pleasure. Pleasure and trauma are united in the search for the extraordinary, along with panic and dread. An affective destabilisation occurs. (2006:54–56)

Ardenne observes that it must be understood that the desire to see a violent image is related to our own internal violence, whether it is more or less accepted:

To want to see violence is to sense our own intimate violence, hidden in dark corners of our psyche, to endure our own disavowed potential for brutality, our inclination to sadism and masochism, the diffuse and tyrannical existence of our visual unconsciousness. In fact, not all desires for visualization are things that can be “lived out”: for many of us, several remain impossible and out of reach. This is, in fact, the “raison d’être” for viewing violence. In libidinous and narcissistic terms, this is its function: to confront us with our own “unliveable” desires, even if the price is the most severe self-disgust and powerlessness. (311)

Or rather:

The “extreme” image is one that assaults the exterior, one that is not in me, but beside me, one that I do not find preformed in my ordinary stock of mental images (or hidden among them, buried somewhere in the opaque terrain of my visual unconscious). (44)

The question raised by Huang Yong Ping’s work concerns the caution that spectators bring to this type of work, a caution that minimizes the event in itself—that of the insects really eating each other—leaving only the spectacle of art in action visible.

Isn’t there something obscene in this situation? In my opinion, the transformation of the events of September 11 into a spectacle smacks of this obscenity.

In these cases, the law of no return, a law that establishes the tacit contract with the spectators and that wants all performers to find themselves in the same state of integrity at the end of the play as at the beginning, is refuted, displacing the stage towards performance and not the theatrical stage. Ardenne says that this type of spectacle goes beyond the boundaries of the everyday (nothing obliges the artist to risk his life), those of propriety (killing oneself in public transgresses social conventions), those of aesthetics (the performance is well beyond a strictly visual image to be watched and is based in a dangerous game), and those of psychology (it is expected that artistic practice will offer some benefit through creation, a narcissistic satisfaction, or even a sublimation; but here, that artist is invoking potentially real death). We are becoming a society where the cult of emotion and the extreme is almost unequivocally deemed to be positive, leaving aside the moral criteria related to these kinds of manifestations (2006:12).

Once again, the question of ethics arises, not in the form of “how far can art go?” but rather as “how far am I as a spectator ready to go in order to accept a work as artistic?” It brings to mind a remark by Richard Schechner during a 2008 conference in São Paulo when he was confronted with this evidence: “Art can be bad.” It is as though art is no longer subject solely to aesthetic judgment and becomes part of the domain of ethics.

This seems to be the perspective from which we should analyze the ambiguity of Stockhausen’s affirmation about viewing the September 11 attack on New York’s World Trade Center as an artistic work (see Schechner 2009). Even when considered in its proper context (it

13. Paul Ardenne adds: “The opposite is true for the extreme spectacle, which allows for this upheaval, because it is extra or super. The power of the extreme spectacle lies in its power to disturb, its capacity to violate comfort, to break down our defenses, to genuinely push us into panic. In this case we are buried in emotion to the point of being physically incapable of response. In other words, jarred, damaged. Is this the pinnacle of emotion? It seems to be due to this unique quality of the extreme spectacle, where emotion is thoroughly exploited, with a maximum return: the art of degradation” (2006:96).
seems Stockhausen was talking about the forces of evil when a journalist asked the question), this comment continues to provoke many reactions, and justly so. In effect, it raises the same questions as our examination of the spectators’ responsibility and the importance of the view they bring to events.

As in the case of Huang Yong Ping’s Théâtre du Monde, talking about art in this context renders the event abstract, leaving only its symbolic dimension. It erases the violence of reality (such as the Chilean revolution, the Tutsis’ genocide, and the carnivorous insects) and projects an artistic legitimacy. Jean Baudrillard’s assessment offers a copious illustration of this. In the September 11 attacks he saw a spectacular performance consciously orchestrated by the terrorists, a staging that captured the imagination of a public that today is accustomed to understanding reality through images projected on a screen:

Because of terrorism, they [the towers] have become the most beautiful buildings in the world — something that they were not when they existed. Whatever one might think of their aesthetic qualities, the Twin Towers were absolutely a performance, and their destruction is itself an absolute performance. (2002:18)

Of course, nothing prevents us from recognizing the performativity, even the theatricality of the September 11 attacks (or that of the Hiroshima bomb). The photogenic quality of these events, which has been abundantly exploited by the media, could legitimize their inclusion in the world of art, but doing so nullifies the events themselves. The very violence of the events is minimized, as though it were possible to treat human life as a pictorial element (such as color, light, etc.).

In our society there is a sort of trivialization of the image caused by the media. For example, by emphasizing the “photogenic” aspects of the film segment and its unique perspective, and deemphasizing the lives lost, the continuous loop of the airplanes crashing into the two towers has made these images so familiar that they no longer possess any cathartic power. They are consumed as “works of art” and have lost much of their violence and impact.

The image has been aestheticized, leaving the spectators on the outside of the event itself. The spectators forget the horror of the suffering and broken lives evoked in the image they are looking at, and shift into observing it as a work of art. The aestheticized image dominates, demonstrating first a dematerialization of the event by the media, and then its later rematerialization outside of the aesthetic perspective.

This is a case of consciously and freely aestheticizing a violent image, which Stockhausen seems to be recognizing in his famous remark.

In this perspective, which gives precedence to the photogenic quality of the event, spectators find themselves integrating the event into an artistic process, transforming it into a scene of spectacle, an object of the gaze, projecting the theatricality that I am evoking onto it and thus necessarily a distance between the observer and the observed. But there are also other purely gratuitous scenes of extreme violence that spectators can view, either voyeuristically or to test the limits of their own endurance. This is the case in the execution of businessman Nick Berg (Nicholas Evan Berg) that was broadcast on the internet and can be viewed by some. Gratuitous and obscene violence. Yet this execution, just like the gaze that voluntarily takes it in, has

14. Jean Baudrillard proposes that the only response possible after such an event is an analysis that is "eventually just as unacceptable as the event itself" (2002:24), a radical notion that does not attempt to make sense of the event. “The challenge is no longer in the explaining, but in a duel, in the respective challenges of thought and the event” (24). All thought about the event must abandon all references, all concepts. “Certainly the system will continue, sadly without any end, not even that of its apocalypse. Because the apocalypse is already there in the form of the inexorable dismantling of civilization, and perhaps even the species. But what is disassembled must still be destroyed. And thought and event each play a part in the symbolic act of destruction” (25).
something obscene in it, which was experienced by those who have seen the video clip. This example, given by Ardenne, shows the extent to which aesthetic mediation is necessary in order to absorb the violence of an event or a work.

Let me quote some viewer reactions from Ardenne’s text: “My unhealthy curiosity (of which I am ashamed) led me to view this terrible video, I wasn’t able to view it to the end, I covered the screen and turned off the sound.” Another reaction: “Yes, I have seen that video, and words fail me to describe it... I think that they simply aren’t words to accurately describe what I felt. I’d like to turn the clock back a few hours so that I could choose not to see it, but it’s too late.” Yet others said: “I was so disgusted that I wasn’t even able to watch the whole video... [...] I never should have watched that internet video! I thought I was pretty callous, and I was crying by the end. The screams, and those men who wouldn’t stop! I regret watching the tape and I think I’ll regret it for the rest of my life!” (2006:312). The reason for these reactions, according to Ardenne, comes from the fact that the event is not framed by any narration or artistic work that would show it as a memoriam, or that would legitimize it by constructing a story in order to try and find meaning in it (310–13).

Violence, risk, danger, aggression. In the examples I have mentioned, the spectators receive the torrent of events aimed at them without apparent symbolic mediation. They are suddenly projected into a reality that they did not choose to confront, a reality that the classic form of their initial contract did not necessarily promise.15 The spectators are silently, but visibly, shaken, and sometimes they are even pleased by the clash that jars and provokes them, a shock that assails all of their senses and awakens them, drawing them out of the comfort of illusion, fiction, and the representation that they were expecting. These moments, which I call theatrical events, rearrange the framework of sensations and perceptions, confirming Ardenne’s observations on these issues (57).

In the more serious productions of Castellucci (the mountain climber, the dogs, the contortionist from Genesis: From the Museum of Sleep [1999]), it is, of course, a question of controlled overexcitement, a masterful exploitation of spectacle, but these performances nevertheless exacerbate the contrary forces of preservation and destruction (Ardenne 2006:92) in human beings (abnormality, prowess, risk, danger, etc.). Even these more neutral, softer forms of the emergence of reality onstage cause spectators to reexamine, forcing them to move beyond their familiar perceptual habits, jarring them in their reactions and expectations. This is why the superlative spectacle (mountain climber, contortionist) is not enough to unbalance the spectators. It is too conventional and too predictable. Even these more neutral, softer forms of the emergence of reality onstage cause spectators to reexamine, forcing them to move beyond their familiar perceptual habits, jarring them in their reactions and expectations. This is why the superlative spectacle (mountain climber, contortionist) is not enough to unbalance the spectators. It is too conventional and too predictable. Even considering the risk of disaster, they have a propensity to justify it through narrative and aestheticize it. They are also inscribed within the logic of catharsis, which makes them figures of order, not the opposite. This is not the case for the website Rotten.com, which Ardenne refers to. The site offers the worst insanities that can be submitted to the eye. The site presents real images in their raw state (war atrocities, accidents) with the aim of offering the spectator a genuinely unpleasant uncensored experience by eliminating any story that goes along with the image. And it succeeds.

This aesthetic pursues the extraordinary; it pursues voluntarily exhibited violence, pushing the boundaries of representation (see Didi-Huberman [2003] 2008). Images that cannot be represented are nevertheless offered to the gaze: summary execution (as in the case of the Tutsis in
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Rwanda 94), uncensored death (as in the case of Patricio Guzman’s Argentine cameraman in La Batalla de Chile), and animals devouring each other (as in the case of Huang Yong Ping’s Theatre of the World). The images are unsustainable, and yet are sustained, even enjoyed (see the defense of bullfighting in Spain as a national heritage). This is what Ardenne calls traumatic enjoyment. This enjoyment operates on the classical principle of catharsis and allows the purging of our most unspoken desires, particularly those related to murder.

References


