

Are we so happy that we've lost all of the 'tragic spectators'? [1]

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Martha Nussbaum argues that to develop or engender a culture of 'respectful compassion' we need to take care to instil an 'education in common human weakness and vulnerability' in every child. She maintains that childhood should be a space in which children 'learn to be tragic spectators and to understand with subtlety and responsiveness the predicaments to which human life is prone' (2003: 24). Taking Nussbaum's argument as a point of departure I want to explore in this paper whether the desire to develop, engender or indeed participate in this kind of culture still holds relevance in the current highly technologised western world. Do we still care about 'common weakness and vulnerability' or has our ability to respond to the pain and suffering of others become compromised by the fact that we are continually bombarded with information and that the moral frameworks of old (of say religion, or a coherent government perhaps) no longer hold as steadfastly as they once did for many western subjects? And given the focus on consumption and exchange that operates in this society of individuals, is it our level of participation in this economy that denotes our level of happiness?

This paper draws on the example of a radio chat show competition (aired on 2Day FM and online on July 17 2009), in which the drama hinged on the deliberate humiliation of its contestants. I reflect on whether viewers of the online streaming and listeners to the show might feel that compassion, or indeed any empathic response, is owed to the competition's participants. Ultimately I am concerned with asking whether or not in the context of a society of individuals, a society in which the lives, experiences and suffering of others are in constant circulation, we still have the capacity to respond as 'tragic spectators'.

Nussbaum cogently argues that 'through stories and dramas [children] should learn to decode the suffering of others, and this decoding should deliberately lead them into the lives of distant humans and the lives of animals' (2003: 24). She is careful to explain that

this learning, this 'education of emotion' should 'take place in a culture of ethical criticism, and especially self-criticism, in which ideas of equal respect for humanity will be active players in the effort to curtail the excesses of the greedy self' (2003: 25). These are commendable frameworks. They are inspiring and they are worth striving for, but can they work in a world in which so much of our culture of exchange is now mediated and facilitated by (or even predicated on) technology and on modes of exchange that are virtual? We live in a domain in which the concept of proximity to the other becomes complicated by the immediacy and speed of access to the lives and stories of myriad others. Do we experience the same sense of responsibility for the others we might encounter online (or on screens of various sorts) as those we meet in our day-to-day lives? To put this another way, does the distance created by the screen, and our constant immersion in the online environment have the potential to impact on our ability to galvanise our emotional resources in a way that would facilitate a response of care and consideration (or compassion) for the other(s) in question? Or does this shift in how we communicate, how we engage in relationships of exchange, demand a new paradigm to account for the ways in which this shift in modes of communication impacts on these engagements?

We are, according to Zygmunt Bauman living in a world of consumers. A context in which responsibility is a uniquely individual experience and one in which we have little recourse to a community for support or guidance in our decision making or our experiences in and negotiation of the world around us. Given this context then how do we conduct ourselves? As Bauman makes clear:

Ours are the times of *strongly felt moral ambiguity*. These times offer us freedom of choice never before enjoyed, but also cast us into a state of uncertainty never before so agonizing. We yearn for guidance we can trust and rely upon, so that some of the haunting responsibility for our choices could be lifted from our shoulders. (1993: 20-1; original emphasis)

This 'freedom of choice' includes access to the lives of others in ways that are unprecedented. How indeed do we find satisfaction, fulfilment or happiness in this

context? For Bauman it is clear that in our current environment with its focus on the individual and on individualisation many of us pursue happiness via the attainment of pleasures in the guise of objects or experiences that can be purchased. We yearn for something “exclusive” or unique that might allow us to position ourselves and our lives as different from (and perhaps as more meaningful than or even superior to) the lives of our friends and associates. However, this is a never-ending pursuit. While many of us do and can find meaning and happiness (or a sense of fulfilment at least) in the attainment of objects or experiences, the rewards are fleeting as we quickly move on in search of greater attainments. As Bauman defines it: ‘Happiness means the acquisition of things other people have no hope of acquiring. Happiness needs *one-upmanship* ...’ (2008:26; original emphasis). This idea of ‘one-upmanship’ as an integral component in the pursuit of happiness can be seen to pervade all aspects of life, from the experiences and objects we aspire to in our everyday lives to the ways in which we interact with others both literally and virtually. As I read it, what concerns Bauman is that those who participate in this desperate pursuit (and he points out that not many of us are immune) run the risk of forgetting about their own sense of self respect, control and responsibility but also about their ability to respond to or engage with others. In effect they lose (or have the potential to lose) the ability to be Nussbaum’s ‘tragic spectators’. [2]

In his book *Liquid Fear* Bauman considers how the Internet and social networking operate – not principally in terms of happiness – but more broadly in terms of the ways in which we use these media to connect with and respond to others. He makes the point, as I see it, that much of our sense of connection in these contexts has the potential to be shallow and unreal. He argues that the ‘virtual proximity’ online environments purport to offer us does not substitute for real connection, real communication or real relationships; that is for concrete, lived or face to face modes of connection with others. He goes on to explain that: ‘it seems the most seminal accomplishment of virtual proximity is the separation between communication and relationship’ and that ‘being connected is less costly than being engaged’ (Bauman, 2006: 63). In effect then the fact that these technologies are now integral to our lives means that we must carefully consider what our participation in them does for our understanding of a sense of connection. Given this context how might our ability and desire to connect, access, engage with and respond to the distant (or

proximate) other be interpreted both in terms of what it might say about the pursuit of happiness as 'one-upmanship' and its relationship to Nussbaum's 'culture of respectful compassion'? Jodie Dean suggests that our capacity to respond politically has been undermined by, 'the intense circulation of content in communicative capitalism,' which 'occludes the antagonism necessary for politics, multiplying antagonism into myriad minor issues and events' (2009: 24). [3] Perhaps Dean is right and the political is being leeched out of events, ideas and communication more broadly because of their 'intense circulation'. But it is a complicated matter and there is no one theoretical model or formula that will account fully for the ways in which we as spectators and participants engage in relationships (or moments of exchange) with issues, events or people as we encounter them via technology. To explore this issue further and to probe some of the complexities involved it is useful to consider how one such event, the 'Home or Away' competition on radio station 2Day FM operated for its audiences.

The show

2DayFM is a mainstream radio station located in Sydney, Australia. [4] The hosts of 'Sydney's most popular breakfast show' (Blight, 2010) are the 'celebrities' Kyle Sandilands and Jackie O. The *Kyle and Jackie O Show* regularly attracts audiences of between 550,000 and 600,000 people who can listen and watch the show unfold online each weekday morning. Sandilands and O have a reputation for their controversial and at times blatantly provocative approach to interviewees and for their competitions, which are often seen as outrageous. The most notorious of these was the competition in which they subjected a listener to a lie detector test. During this test the 14-year-old female contestant disclosed to her mother and to the show's hosts during a live broadcast that she had been raped at 12 years of age. [5] Other lie detector test competitions have included the questioning of contestants 'on subjects such as STDs; masturbation; anal sex; threesomes; and eating faeces during sex' (Black, 2009). These competitions and games along with the hosts' banter and 'humour' make the breakfast show incredibly popular amongst the 18-24 and 25-39 demographics. [6]

The competition I want to focus on took place nine days before the lie detector test competition in which the rape was disclosed. The 'Home or Away' competition was aired on July 20 2009. This was a reunion competition that allowed 'loved ones' who had not been able to see one another for a long time because they 'could not afford to meet' to spend some time together (Jackie O, in *Media Watch*). [7] The reunion competition was streamed live on 2Day FM's website while it aired. The winner of the competition was 'Sally' whose real name is Saveth Chorn, and who came to Australia as a refugee from the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia. Saveth's sister went to the United States in 1986 and Saveth entered the competition in the hope of meeting her sister's daughter for the first time. On the day before Dana Vann, Saveth's niece, was set to fly to Australia from her home in California for the reunion they were told on air that there was a twist to the competition. They were told that instead of just winning and being united Dana would be installed in a sound proof booth and 'Sally' would have to select Dana's booth from a choice of three in order to win the prize of meeting Dana. As Jackie O explained to Sally: 'Now, if you don't pick the right door, if Dana's not the door you pick, Dana flies straight home. No meeting.' And Kyle Sandilands continued, just to emphasise the point: 'So she flies over here, 15 hours. She stands behind the door. If you pick the wrong door Dana gets back on the plane, flies home, 15 hours' (Sandilands in *Media Watch*).

Although asked on air if she wanted to back out of the competition Dana had been told off air that she had made a commitment once the air ticket had been purchased and that she could not back out. The girls were not allowed to contact one another before the competition and Saveth Chorn told *Media Watch* that a producer at 2Day FM made it clear to her that 'they had ways to find out if I did... "and if you do we'll pull the plug on this straight away and you won't be able to see her."'

On competition day 'Sally' selected the wrong door and she was devastated. Dana and 'Sally' could see each other but not hear one another, as Dana's booth was soundproof. The audience could hear, and if watching online, see everything. 'Sally' and Dana were understandably distraught and were crying and pleading. Dana was hysterical and was saying 'I'm not going back to America. ... You can't do this. You can't do this ... it's our first time we've even met each other' and 'Sally' was crying saying 'It's horrible. You can't do

this.’ (Vann in *Media Watch*) Kyle and Jackie O let the girls plead, cry and beg and this carried on for eight minutes (during which time there was a commercial break, the news, weather and traffic report and some listener calls etc), by the time the presenters returned to the girls, both were on their knees begging. In fact Dana explained later that she was advised to beg and to ‘look desperate’ by producer Chrissy in her booth. Dana did what was asked and begged. She said ‘Please Kyle, I’m on my knees. Let me stay please...’ to which Sandilands replied ‘There’s no need to get on your knees. Why is everyone blaming me as if this is my whole brainchild?’ and Dana continued ‘...please *2DayFM* let me stay, please.’ (Vann in *Media Watch*) The anguish was palpable and at the end of the eight minutes they were allowed to stay and the crying continued as they ran towards one another and embraced.

Reactions to this competition were diverse. Online comments reflect the fact that spectators engaged with the show in different ways and to varying degrees. However the majority of respondents were positive about the competition. Some felt that because it was a game and one in which ‘Sally’ effectively lost by selecting the wrong booth, the hosts should not have allowed the girls to win by letting them meet. Others found it very funny and highlighted the fact that while it was very ‘mean’ they loved it. One respondent thought that the competition was ‘trash’. [8]

Relax it’s only a game... [9]

Because this was a game and the participants accepted its terms then surely as some of the respondents pointed out they were responsible for the implications of the game. As Bauman argues, in our current society many of us believe that, ‘whatever happens to an individual can be retrospectively interpreted as a further confirmation of their sole and inalienable responsibility for their plight – and for adversities as much as successes’ (2008). As the game unfolds spectators watch, gain currency from and (some) enjoy the humiliation and suffering of the contestants. They may even justify their consumption of this spectacle by arguing that ‘Sally’ and Dana are individuals who have made choices and as such, echoing Bauman’s thesis, they (not us) are ultimately responsible for those choices. If this is the case then does their participation allow spectators to participate

also – vicariously - and to delight, as some respondents did, in their screams? Does the fact that this is a game give spectators permission to watch? But what kind of game is this?

As spectators who are media consumers we are likely to be wary of games particularly on mainstream media, and to mistrust their ‘tricks’ and modes of representation. We know that what we are seeing and hearing has been curated, edited and selected to some degree to maximise exposure and ultimately to sell something. Does it make any difference to us to know that the game held at least one trick that has since come to light? While Dana was offered the opportunity to withdraw on the live broadcast she knew from her off air discussions that this was not a real option, given her ‘commitment’ to the process. The Australian program *Media Watch* (produced by the national broadcaster) that reports on journalistic standards and conduct devoted an episode to some of the competitions run by Sandilands and O and they reported that Dana told them in a sworn statement that she was effectively coerced into continuing the competition. Might knowledge of the coercion involved alter the responses of spectators who felt that the girls should not have been given the prize of unification? Might it have altered the responses of those who found pleasure in the meanness of the game? The framing of this game positioned it squarely as something to which the majority of audience members could respond without experiencing a sense of unease. But it is also necessary to consider that these are real human beings whose emotional lives are being manipulated (willingly or not) for the edification of an audience. Does the fact that this is a game override the need to respond to Saveth and Dana with the ‘subtlety and responsiveness’ Nussbaum believes is crucial? And more importantly what does the success of this kind of broadcasting say about our culture more broadly? Are we so isolated and disconnected from any moral guidance, any sense of community or belonging as Bauman claims that we no longer know when to take a stand? Might the most powerful way to exercise our ‘respectful compassion’ in this context be to refuse to spectate and to walk away or to label the program ‘trash’ as one respondent did?

While outrage and disgust are valid emotional responses in this context we need to acknowledge that the processes of negotiation that take place in the construction of

these games (as products that are tailored for specific media audiences) are multilayered and complex. In particular there is the question of what kind of agency to afford Dana and Saveth. As spectators we come to understand that they chose (despite coercion and other possible negotiations that we do not know about) to participate. By virtue of their involvement and their agreement to participate in this game, Dana and Saveth are read differently than unwitting or 'innocent' victims and are unlikely to attract the same level of empathy or compassion afforded to those unwittingly injured or traumatised by foul play or natural disaster.

As spectators we also mistrust the constructed nature of these kinds of media games and know that there are operational rules involved. As such we, for the most part, moderate or temper our responses and we know that a different kind of spectatorship is required here than might be in 'real' or less constructed contexts. In other words we know this game is something that has been developed to create hype or spectacle, to win audience share and effectively to generate income for the station and its hosts. We do not trust Kyle and Jackie O, and as spectators we are suspicious of their motives. As a consequence then we may also read Dana and Saveth with some scepticism. While we may feel momentary compassion for their plight while they beg and cry we also know that this reading may in fact be naïve and that the media juggernaut that constructs the game engages them in a complex process of negotiation. Given this framing then we understand that they have agreed to hand over responsibility for their representation in an active process that may engender unease, but is something for which compassion is not *necessarily* required. [10] The rules of this game seem clear. Dana and Saveth are participating in a game and we as respondents are also participating. The prize for us is that we have the opportunity – should we wish to take it – to achieve Bauman's sense of happiness as 'one-upmanship', to revel in or at least be pleased by the pain they experience during the game and the joy they achieve on meeting.

But there are other questions to be asked here. These questions circulate around the idea of an individualised society in which we do, or can, gain happiness (however fleeting) from the consumption of experiences and events. Bauman suggests that our desire for equality and the inability of the majority to achieve it results in a 'vulnerability' that is '(at

least potentially) universal' (2008). He argues that it is this sense of 'vulnerability' and insecurity that fuels our search for happiness in the game of 'one-upmanship', and is therefore another factor in why we might consume or participate in this particular competition. Is it the case that watching or listening to 'Sally' and Dana beg on *The Kyle and Jackie O Show* provides a sense of security or protection for some spectators? Or that it reassures people that they are safe, better off, immune to, or protected from, the suffering they witness, and that their own vulnerabilities as Bauman argues, are assuaged. Alternatively, does it provide a vehicle in which to rage against inequity and exploitation without actually having to become emotionally involved? Given the speed and immediacy of communication is it too easy to consume and then to respond with a hasty message, or not respond at all, and therefore to move on to the next event that is circulated or available for our response? Are any or all of these responses related to the possibility that the constant bombardment we experience results in empathy fatigue? Or is it that we reserve our energies for responding to or feeling compassion for people we deem to be truly suffering? As Susan Sontag argues 'Citizens of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk, are schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity. Some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved' (2003:111).

Has this cynicism increased as a consequence of the circulation of images? Is it that because this is a game and because it is a game with a prize, and a highly constructed game at that, we are simply not required to feel in response, or to mobilise our capacity for 'tragic spectatorship'? The answer to all of these questions is both yes and no. There are multiple modes of response to this competition. Despite the framing, the idea of the game and even considering the notion of happiness as 'one-upmanship' some people did respond, did feel compassion and did engage with (what could be read as) Dana and Saveth's pain or exploitation. When the program was subjected to the scrutiny of *Media Watch* respondents on that show's website were for the most part outraged. There were calls for action, for censorship, for the removal of the show's hosts and an appeal to the 'Australian Communications and Media Authority' to step in and prevent these kinds of stunts going to air. Spectators to the show as it was aired on *Media Watch* did not participate in the game of 'one-upmanship' in the same way as those who responded to

the live streaming or the radio broadcast. They activated Nussbaum's 'respectful compassion' by responding in detail (and in no uncertain terms) to the program and to the behaviour of Sandilands and O as well as the radio station's management and ethos. But of course *Media Watch* attracts a different demographic than 2Day FM and it also engages in a process of curating, shaping and editing material so respondents potentially gained a very different reading of the show than they might have if they had watched it or listened to it as a live broadcast. As well as this the *Media Watch* special covered both the lie detector competition in which the rape disclosure was made and the 'Home or Away' competition.

Happiness is... (not what it's about?)

Ultimately what this example and the myriad responses to it demonstrate is that there is no single way in which people responded to this competition. For many respondents the framing of this event as a game and perhaps the fact that the participants were not hurt (physically) means that it offers a freedom of response – the idea of a morally neutral mode of spectatorship – that is not tethered to any framework of responsibility, and that does not *necessarily* require compassion, respect or even consideration of the other. This can be an item to be consumed in the quest for a feeling of happiness based in 'one-upmanship'. It can, perhaps momentarily, soothe the vulnerability of an individual who feels alone and potentially disconnected. But the competition can also trigger something deeper and for some respondents there was a refusal to consume, a demand not just for response but also for responsibility (and in some cases by extension for censure of the hosts) as well as for understanding of the emotional investments of Saveth and Dana. For these respondents Nussbaum's sense of being 'tragic spectators' was alive and at play. For others the only response that could possibly demonstrate 'respectful compassion' entailed switching off or walking away from the program and refusing to spectate.

By extension then we can argue that we are constantly bombarded with ideas, information, events and stories that request or demand our engagement – in both coercive and non-coercive ways – through the manipulation of affect, through direct appeal or through the sheer awfulness of what is being depicted. But this does not mean

that we have only one way to respond, or that our senses are so dulled that we are incapable of compassion or empathy as a consequence. What it does mean is that there is, as Bauman clearly explains, a sense in which happiness as 'one-upmanship' operates and is perhaps condoned or enhanced by the increasing circulation of material available to us and often demanding of our attention. But this is not the only mode of response. There are other ways of being too – of finding meaning and fulfilment and perhaps as an occasional bonus, happiness. By being able to respond with compassion, with empathy or with the demand for change, justice or responsibility – which we do in specific or particular individual contexts and situations, we enact and re-enact our capacity as 'tragic spectators'.

Despite the changes to society that see us as potentially atomised and yearning for guidance, we are capable of moving beyond our own vulnerabilities and our own need for reassurance to listen to and hear the call of the other. But perhaps in this current society the triggers that engender this response are more diverse and as a consequence they may be more diffuse and difficult to see or to quantify than they may have been in the past. That is, we do respond with compassion but these responses are triggered in many different contexts for different individuals and therefore they are not necessarily as obvious or as easily recognisable as they may have been in previous more cohesive or singular societies. In fact I would like to end this paper by suggesting that perhaps it is due to our continual bombardment and due to the increasing focus on measurement, on attainment and on display (and perhaps in terms of games such as this one – our revulsion at its manipulation of emotion and pain for affect) that many of us actively search again and again for fora, spaces or contexts (big and small) within which we can activate and keep alive our 'respectful compassion' (Nussbaum, 2003: 24).

Endnotes

[1] I am very grateful to Trish Harris and Josephine Wilson for their insightful responses to this paper and the arguments contained within it.

[2] In a different context Nussbaum raises similar concerns about the need for a society that is based on 'extended compassion', when she says that 'world citizenship is impossible when the powerful define their humanity in terms of possessions, rather than the goods of the soul' (2003b).

[3] While there is an overwhelming amount of material circulating in the West and it is in affluent Western societies that the individual is increasingly atomised as Bauman makes clear. It is also important to point out that this circulation of material has proved important and at times crucial in a range of contexts, particularly in non Western societies. For instance, the recent uprisings in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia as well as the protests in Iran in 2009 were widely circulated on the Internet and it was through this circulation that individuals, cultures and societies were able to combat (to varying degrees) the oppression they were subjected to. As Dean continues: 'In relatively closed societies, that antagonism is not only already clear but also apparent at and as the very frontier between open and closed' (2009: 24). But the value of the circulation of material is not only something that pertains to non-Western societies, there are myriad instances in which the circulation of material has allowed people access to situations they may never have know about previously. This access then places people (spectators or respondents) in a position where they have a choice to make in terms of how they choose to respond.

[4] 2Day FM is in the top three FM stations in terms of listener numbers in Sydney.

[5] There was a national outcry in the media in response to this revelation. The then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd argued that a police investigation into the situation was entirely appropriate and Tim Costello, Head of World Vision and leading psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg were amongst a number of prominent Australians who made a

public statement calling for the show to be axed. This incident also resulted in a temporary decline in the show's ratings and as a result Kyle Sandilands who was also a judge on Channel 10's *Australian Idol* competition was sacked when advertising sponsors became nervous about the potential for their brands to be tarnished by association. The *Kyle and Jackie O* show was suspended for two weeks. This was not the only time that Sandilands' comments (in particular) caused the show to be suspended. For more information see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyle_Sandilands#cite_note-Age-2009-09-03-32

[6] See: <http://www.austereo.com.au/docs/NationalPressRelease22009.pdf> for information on *2Day FM*'s demographic appeal and popularity in early 2009.

[7] See *Media Watch* (3 August 2009) for the details on the program and sections of audio from the competition

<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s2644599.htm>><http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s2644599.htm>

[8] See <http://www.2dayfm.com.au/shows/kyleandjackieo/blog/home-or-away--the-full-story/20090717-4u7i.html> for all of the responses.

[9] I am aware of the significant literature on play and I spent considerable time thinking about the ways in which Richard Schechner's theorisations of play and dark play might operate here. In the end I felt that this particular game was too tightly scripted and manipulated to be usefully analysed in terms of the aims of my argument, via a detailed engagement with play on its own terms. For more information on play, dark play and both western and non-western conceptions of playing see Schechner's *The Future of Ritual* and *Performance Studies: an introduction*.

[10] While this is generally true, questions were asked about the level of autonomy experienced by the young girl who participated in the game where she revealed that she had been raped. The fact that she was allowed to participate at 14 and that she

seemed not to want to proceed indicate that it is not always the case that the decision to participate in these events is truly active.

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