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The End of Ethics?

The announcement of the 'End of History' has not produced nor been coincident with an end to the ideological differences encoded within that concept. Instead it has seen an intensification of conflicts which, however local in origin, are global in scope: civilization wars, culture wars, wars on terror and drugs, perhaps a re-emergent cold war? In terms of the local investment in these conflicts, the government led by John Howard in Australia has been an enthusiastic protagonist in these wars and in the absurd parody of 'situation ethics' that they have produced. This is the least ethical government in living memory in Australia but it has still been tremendously popular. Perhaps it's the sheer frankness of this unethical behaviour at the highest level of political life in Australia in the last decade that provokes the question in the title of our issue of *Performance Paradigm*. But it is not our intention here to rehearse the litany of subtle abuses of ethics in this part of the world or in this period of political history. Nor are we announcing the 'End of Ethics' as the ethical correlative to arguments about the 'End of History'.

The title is a provocation to re-think the discourse of ethics in relation to political performance and art, and to re-assert its significance in a time when neo-con furries are unleashed upon the world and, in the global context, war has displaced alternative methods of conflict management and resolution.

In the Australian context, performance has been a significant site of engagement with these issues, as a number of the essays in this issue attest. Some artists have responded directly to a number of the key policy initiatives of the Howard government, particularly in respect of its infamous mistreatment of asylum seekers. But we also see evidence of an international context for this kind of protest, even if it is not in forms of direct action, in which artists and theorists are promoting alternate forms of ethical engagement.

The essays in this issue of *Performance Paradigm* provide an account of the diverse range of recent performance works in which the possibility of the ethical response to political events is directly broached or even structurally implicated in the work itself. For instance, Maria Magdalena Schwagermann in her interview with Margaret Hamilton also addresses the complexities of both performance and spectatorship (in a way that echoes the insightful questions Parr's work generates) when she talks about the potential of performance to implicate us (as spectators) in a process of ethical reflection. Schwagermann prefers

'responsibility' to politics and talks about the multiple ways in which performance can enact/engender this responsibility. She draws on the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio among others to consider the ways in which performance can pierce the 'masks' of the spectator to engage him/her in a process of reflection and exchange.

The parameters of ethical response are clearly not fixed though neither perhaps are they entirely 'situational' (in Fletcher's sense of the paradigm of *agape* or love for the other). Of the various approaches to this discourse available to scholars and artists, perhaps the most pertinent to this topic and the one most frequently cited in these essays is the one outlined by Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, ethics centres on the responsibility for and to 'the other' in a contingent and situational rather than abstract relation.

Jeffrey Nealon describes this relation as 'responsiveness' and adds that 'ethics is born and maintained through the necessity of performative response to the other person.' Importantly for the essays collected here, Nealon points out that such a responsiveness 'comes necessarily before the solidification of any theoretical rules or political norms of ethical conduct.' [1] In this sense the discourse of ethics is itself both paradigmatic and performative.

What emerges in these essays are the most unlikely places of ethical response where such a concept would otherwise seem to have no possible grounding in reality. As in Jeff Stewart's essay on visiting the Rwandan genocide memorial site at Murambi, Gikongoro. This essay meditates on the hardcore of these questions of culture and ethics, on what it means to witness an atrocity and to maintain a state of witnessing in the context of public memorials and acts of representation. For Stewart the proximity to the atrocity threatens to overwhelm the task of representation which is essential to effective witness and to memory.

Issues of distance and closeness resonate with Brechtian traditions of political theatre practice and the need to find an objective perspective to produce an ethical response but also remind us that the age of compassion fatigue is upon us with its relentless mediated re-enactment of distant suffering brought close to us in our living rooms. In Maaïke Bleeker's essay this 'withdrawal of sympathy' can precipitate ethical and critical engagement with civil society.

Her analysis of political performances by and about politicians such as Bill Clinton, Ronald Reagan and Silvio Berlusconi negotiates the space between theatricality and truthfulness in representational democracy. As Bleeker argues, 'the difficulty to sympathise is indicative of the difficulty of accepting the fundamentally theatrical character of reality, as well as of politics and of democracy.' This is equally the case for David Williams (whose essay deals with the Australian experience of this aspect of political performance)

Regardless of these difficulties we can still manage to convince ourselves that we are all ethical spectators, that we don't participate in the festival of cruelty taking place on our plasma screens. This issue of spectatorship is a key topic in this discussion which the writers in this issue treat in different ways. At root they are asking whether it is still possible to

maintain an ethics of spectatorship? I think this question requires a response, however contingent, in this introduction.

One recent attempt to theorise this condition of spectatorship at the end of ethics is Luc Boltanski's *Distant Suffering. Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge 1999). Boltanski asks how can we keep watching human suffering, how can we ethically view this suffering? How do we fight compassion fatigue? Boltanski says that the spectator is passive by definition and is therefore not an actor or an agent. He identifies three principle possibilities for ethical response, ie, a response based on pity and concern but one which takes a position: (i) a kind of emotional response which is angered by the suffering and wants to find a target for this anger. This response typically vents itself in the denunciation of a persecutor. Pity becomes indignation in a way which is cathartic for the spectator. (ii) an emotional response which is tenderhearted and empathises with the distant suffering and finds recourse to sentiment and tears. The role of the 'benefactor' is foregrounded in this response. Pity becomes sentiment which is also cathartic for the spectator. (iii) the third response, and the one Boltanski seems to find the most useful is the 'aesthetic topic': 'It consists in considering the unfortunate's suffering as neither unjust (so as to become indignant about it) nor as touching (so as to be moved to tears by it) but as sublime.'(115) Sublime is here considered as 'delicious horror and painful enjoyment'(121) It involves the sublimation of the feeling of pity not as a hysterical confusion of self with the 'suffering unfortunate' but arising from what Adam Smith called the 'impartial spectator'. This spectator is productive of critical speech or gestures which serve to fuse the suffering and the spectatorial 'sensitivity' (116). For example, the painter or *exhibitor* who reveals the true horror of the distant suffering and thereby 'confers on this suffering the only form of dignity to which it can lay claim' (116).

Here it is a matter of reflexivity, of letting the unrepresentable aspect emerge through one's own subjective engagement with the presentation of distant suffering and of oneself seeing this in the one gesture. As Boltanski puts it: 'The aesthetic process... thus consists in making the object enter the subject's interiority in order, by coming out from within, to reveal its unrepresentable aspect. This process and only this process saves suffering from insignificance (from the absurd, from nihilism etc.)' (117).

The open-ended structures of contemporary performance require a response of this kind from spectators. Artists in this field of aesthetic activity return to the suffering of others, of asylum seekers and prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, and ask to what extent are audiences, as citizens, complicit in this suffering? For example, in a number of recent performance art actions since 2000 Mike Parr has required the audience to electroshock his body in order to participate in the action. In doing this he has raised the question of complicity in the suffering of the other as an ethical dilemma for an audience, a dilemma which is perceived very directly and at close range rather than experienced as an abstraction or at a distance.

Yet, despite Boltanski's arguments, isn't restricting oneself to spectatorship precisely an unethical activity in a global context of renewed political violence and the rise of neo conservative politics? In an interview with *Performance Paradigm*, Professor Baz Kershaw

identifies the production of passive spectatorship with the essence of the end of ethics. He counteracts this with aesthetics based on participation and with the pathology of optimism: 'The closer the world gets to the 'end of ethics' the more need there will be for radical performance activists who suffer from 'pathologies of hope'.'

Reports from the frontline of conflict suggest that these pathologies while far from reaching epidemic proportions, can be highly infectious. The In Place of War (IPOW) project (www.inplaceofwar.net) is an example of artist/activists regenerating community and spreading the virus of hope through political and performative engagement. In Place of War (IPOW) as Professor Michael Balfour describes it 'is a three and a half year Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) project exploring the context of performance in sites of war: theatre in refugee camps; in war-affected villages; in towns under curfew; in cities under siege. IPOW has been investigating a number of war zone case studies, including Sri Lanka, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, Palestine-Israel, and the Balkans.' There are a number of significant case studies in this project alone which would justify Kershaw's cautious optimism but Professor Balfour's essay takes this project as its point of departure. Balfour reminds us that political theatre isn't always self evidently ethical: 'one person's propaganda is another's theatre of resistance'. Balfour recounts an interview he conducted with a Commander from the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army), 'who, at the height of the 1999 conflict, directed a production which was watched by an audience of over 20,000 soldiers and local villagers on a hillside only a few miles from the front line. ... The performance, *He is Alive*, was part of a cultural programme called *Songs for the Martyrs* (and) showed atrocities committed by Serbian forces and how the KLA were protecting civilians.' However justified the KLA actions, this use of theatre as overt propaganda in war complicates the picture of performance as an essentially ethical site of social exchange.

The End of Ethics? aims to resituate performance as a properly liminal practice whose rules of engagement come 'necessarily before the solidification of any theoretical rules or political norms of ethical conduct' and whose outcomes, in terms of social cohesion, can be indeterminate.

In his interview with *Performance Paradigm*, Rustom Barucha signals that for him performance occupies an increasingly liminal place: 'I find the established theatre—the theatre performed in civic spaces—boring and exclusionary. Outside the theatre, or even witnessing extremely marginal practices such as 'prison theatre' in the confines of a prison, I feel freer to think and to renew my connection to the theatre.'

Horit Peled's essay deals with the militarised liminal space of the controlled zone between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and in particular with the *MachsomWatch*, 'a group of Israeli women who actively monitor the checkpoints placed by the Israeli military throughout the West Bank in order to control the movement of Palestinians in their own habitat.' Peled identifies their tactics 'intervening on behalf of the Palestinians at the checkpoints in situations overflowing with excess control' as performative ethics.

Lalita McHenry focuses on exclusion of a different kind in terms of the issues of disability and embodiment. Her discussion suggests an alternative model of political theatre, one that, as she says, can 'challenge and contradict what Philipa Rothfield calls, 'the *disembodied universalism* that is so often invoked in ethical discussions'. McHenry's essay shows that in unexpected ways performance is continuing to act as an agent for social critique and change. In this sense her contribution is indicative of the significance of *The End of Ethics?* in suggesting the extensive and unforeseen range, the strange sites and the newly forming terrain of ethical responses in performance.

Notes

[1]. Jeffrey Nealon, *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity*. (London: Duke UP, 1988: 34).

Editorial Note

Performance Paradigm issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:
http://web.archive.org/web/*/performanceparadigm.net

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