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Watching Whoopi:

The Ethics and Politics of the Ethics of Witnessing

However, any attempt to provide an objective account of the event, either by breaking it up into a mass of its details or by setting it in its context, must conjure with two circumstances, one is that the number of details identifiable in any singular event is potentially infinite, and the other is that the 'context' of any singular event is infinitely extensive, or at least is not objectively determinable. (White, 1996: 22)

On January 30 2005, just into George W. Bush's second term in the Oval Office, I saw Whoopi Goldberg's *Whoopi: Back to Broadway the 20th Anniversary Show (Whoopi: Back)* on the last night of its run at the Lyceum Theatre in New York. Coincidentally, on this particular night the show was being filmed by HBO who broadcast it later that year. In April 2006 I received the DVD of this performance, ordered via the internet, which includes a copy of the "original show" *Whoopi Goldberg: Direct from Broadway (Goldberg: Direct)* the anniversary of which was "commemorated" by the 2004-5 version. The 1984-5 show was performed in the same theatre and was also filmed by HBO.

I bought the DVD because during the live show I had a sense that its political significance might be greater than the sum of its theatrical parts. Since then, the more I have researched into this piece (and watched the DVDs) the more it has taken on the appearance of 'an event' as theorised by historiographer Hayden White above, writing under the influence of Jacques Derrida. By this I mean that *after* the event, the more I discovered about this performance and its various contexts (before and during the event), the more its possible meanings have expanded into the past and future in a manner that is potentially, infinitely extensive. Except in my mind as an event some of these meanings came together in a "pause" in January 2009 when Barack Obama was inaugurated as Bush's replacement.

Simultaneously *Whoopi: Back* has provoked me to reflect on some of the thinking derived from the poststructuralist and postmodern conceptualisations of “the event” that have circulated within theatre and performance studies for (at least) two decades. In particular, I am concerned with the concept of “witnessing” as part of a discourse of ethics which, as evinced, in recent publications and at conferences, seems to be becoming increasingly prevalent. This discourse emerged as such a dominant theme in discussions at the UK based Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) conference in September 2008, that one delegate was prompted to remark that ‘ethics has become the new politics.’ I understood this as a reference to the way the fashion industry attempts to create trends by designating various colours as the “new black.” As such, even taking this comment at its most flippant it is worth examining some of the assumptions and exclusions that might be being reinscribed “performatively” in the shift of terminology from artist and/or audience to “witness” and from politics to ethics or rather as it sometimes appears, in the conflation of these terms.

“Witness studies”, of course, signals a profoundly interdisciplinary terrain cutting across the social sciences, arts and humanities and may cover matters of both production and reception. Reflecting this, as demonstrated at TaPRA, in theatre and performance studies this discourse now embraces large swathes of the field. It is applied to works concerned with the representation of actual persons and/or “real life” events of a traumatic or otherwise “serious” nature. Equally, as exemplified by Peggy Phelan’s introduction to Tim Etchells’ *Certain Fragments* (2001) (*Fragments*) and her essay ‘Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows’ (2004) (‘Witnessing’), it is applied to certain genres of work with a primarily metaphorical or abstract relationship to “real life” and/or those thought to “trouble” such categories. It is also applied to the documentation of live performances themselves. As in the rest of the arts and humanities, while there are significant differences in approach according to genre, in the majority of cases “witnessing” is linked to a concept of ethics derived from Emmanuel Levinas. This may be translated through a range of other theorists from Hannah Arendt to Shoshana Felman, Theodor Adorno to Gayatri Spivak, to name but a few, but some debt is usually owed to Derrida and/or Jean-François Lyotard. [1]

Obviously I cannot embrace all this terrain in this essay, any more than I can lay out all the details and contexts that make up *Whoopi: Back* as a performance or an event. Therefore, I intend to focus mainly on issues of “ethical witnessing” as articulated by Phelan and to construct my argument by drawing a comparison between my (2006-9) reading of *Whoopi: Back* and Phelan’s 2004 reading of Marina Abramović’s *The House with the Ocean View* (*House*) performed at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York in 2002. However, I must stress that my argument is not primarily with Phelan. Rather, I am using her work as an “example” because she is such an important and influential scholar and because the genealogy of her ideas is signalled more clearly than in many other cases. My actual aim is to raise some questions about what might be at stake ethically and politically in the *generalisation* of the discourse of witnessing across the field. As such, if I am querying why it seldom extends to

“mainstream popular” shows like *Whoopi: Back*, it is not to argue for the inclusion of such work within this discourse but to interrogate the basis of its exclusion.

As evident in *Fragments* and ‘Witnessing’, in theatre and performance studies interest in witnessing arises because it is inextricably tied up with questions of representation and thereby of aesthetics. Further, there is often a special claim to this discourse made on the basis of the *medium*. In ‘Witnessing’ Phelan states ‘The ethical is fundamentally related to live art because both are arenas for the unpredictable force of the social event’ (2004: 575); and again ‘the particular force of live performance concerns the ethical and the aesthetic *tout court*’ (575); and again ‘But the possibility of mutual transformation of both the observer and the performer within the enactment of the live event is extraordinarily important, because this is point where the aesthetic joins the ethical’ (575); and again ‘If Levinas is right, and the face-to-face encounter is the most crucial arena in which the ethical bond we share becomes manifest, then live theatre and performance might speak to philosophy with renewed vigor’ (577). In making these remarks it seems that Phelan is arguing for a privileged relationship between live performance and ethics on very similar terms to those she argued for it having in relation to politics in *Unmarked*. In some of the most frequently quoted phrases in the field, in this book Phelan defined the ‘ontology’ of performance in terms of it ‘becom[ing] itself through disappearance’ and its resistance to objectification and commodification (1993: 146). This, on the basis that it ‘honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward’ (Phelan, 1993: 149). Once it is recorded, documented or otherwise participates in ‘the circulation of representations of representations’, for Phelan, ‘it becomes something other than performance’ (146). In short, as Philip Auslander summarises in *Liveness*, for Phelan ‘once live performance succumbs to mediatization, it loses its ontological integrity’ (1999: 40). In ‘Witnessing’ it is still this ‘resistance to commodity form’ that is ‘one of the most politically [and now ethically] radical aspects of live art’ (Phelan, 2004: 571).

In these terms the “integrity” of the live performance I saw of *Whoopi: Back* is questionable. This was a Broadway revival of a Broadway show by a Hollywood star whose media career was launched by the broadcast version of the 1984-5 production. Amongst other commercial endorsements Goldberg has been “spokesperson” for Slim-Fast diet products. While perceived as a “liberal” production company in the US, in 2004 HBO was owned by Time Warner Inc., a multiplatform, multibillion dollar, transnational media corporation.

My memory of this show has been fundamentally affected by both DVDs, which have been heavily edited for television. All else aside, the close-ups they provide allow access to details of Goldberg’s performance not available to anyone in the auditorium at the time, since though the Lyceum is a relatively small theatre, it is not exactly intimate. For those of us in the middle of the upper circle during the performance I saw, this access was further limited by the movements of a massive hydraulic camera crane which frequently obscured our view of the stage. The level of complaint indicated that none of us had been made aware of the filming or

the limited sightlines in advance. In various ways then this show was thoroughly mediated before and during the live.

Yet in 'Witnessing' Phelan introduces her discussion by reference to Abramović's 'fame and its ties with the market' (2004: 569). In the "art world" this fame dates back to the 1980s but was broad enough by the 1990s for Abramović's image to be used on Illy coffee cups. *House* gathered a number of relatively mainstream awards, was featured in mainstream print media and in 2003 on HBO's drama *Sex and the City*. Nevertheless, Phelan asserts that in this case, 'commercial marketing seems decidedly beside the point' because 'there are other kinds of capital at work in this piece' (571, 576). She goes on to draw a positive analogy between *House* and *Shadows* – an "installation" of paintings by (as Phelan acknowledges, the famously "commercial") Andy Warhol, seen at the Dia Centre for the Arts in 1998-9 and first exhibited in 1979.

If Phelan's ontology of performance can sometimes allow marketing to be put aside, as signalled previously by her discussion of Cindy Sherman's photographs in *Unmarked*, it can also embrace works partly, even wholly, executed in other mediums. Hence 'disappearance' cannot necessarily refer *literally* to the material substance of the artwork. In fact, 'Witnessing' clarifies that while this ontology is defined in opposition to certain mediums, specifically film and video, like all ontology it refers to an *abstract ideal* of the qualities of the medium. An ideal can (of course) never be fully made present but for Phelan this ontology nevertheless signifies the potential of the medium which 'a great number of performances do not approach . . . at all' (2004: 575). This latter distinction can get lost in Phelan's tendency to use the terms live art, theatre, live performance and performance art interchangeably, as she does in her various comments on ethics from 'Witnessing' cited above. Actually, Phelan appears to be describing the (ideal) effects/affects she identifies with particular *forms* and *genres* of practice, which are not exclusive to the medium of live theatre and performance. As such, in *Fragments* "ethical witnessing" is associated with strategies of foregrounding, self reflexivity, fragmented structure and poetic or associative modes of expression and in 'Witnessing' with abstraction, repetition, duration, environmentalism and interactivity. In broad terms such strategies tend to be defined in opposition to realism and naturalism or "representative art" and associated with postmodern understandings of subjectivity. In relation to politics and/or ethics they have been variously understood to point to either the "performative" or the undecidable nature of relationship between the real and the fictional and/or to "bear witness" to the "limits" of the performance's own representation. This is thought to resist "truth claims", including those that presuppose that it is possible to "know", speak for or about others/the other/otherness, a gesture of appropriation said to interpret and recuperate difference(s) in terms of the (self) same. As part of all this, these forms are thought to engage the spectator in the production of multiple and shifting meanings and/or making "decisions" on meanings which (may) promote consciousness of the ethical and/or political responsibility involved in doing so in "everyday reality."

Actually, these are the same forms that critics have associated with “oppositional” politics and/or with ethics and witnessing in a wide range of other mediums during the postmodern era, including video and television. However, core to Phelan’s claim to a special relationship between ethical witnessing and live performance is that *unlike* ‘the pre-recorded or the remote performance’ this medium is “interactive”, so that the spectator’s response can affect and alter the performance in an ‘unscripted’ fashion that allows the possibility of a ‘mutual transformation of both the observer and the performer’ (2004: 575).

People I spoke to in New York at the time referred to *Whoopi: Back* as Goldberg’s return to stand-up, a genre that can include a high degree of interactivity between performer and audience, albeit not necessarily of a transformative nature. However, in an interview accompanying the DVD, Goldberg indicates that *Whoopi: Back* is ‘mostly scripted’ (HBO, 2005). Further, what I saw for two-thirds of this show and the whole of the DVD of *Goldberg: Direct*, was not so much stand-up, as comic character monologues. In 1984-5 the characters included Fontaine a male junkie (with PhD), a Jamaican woman, a woman with physical disabilities, a teenage Los Angeles Valley Girl, and a nine- year-old black girl. (In his review Frank Rich mentions a former tap dancer who does not appear on the DVD.) *Whoopi: Back* reprised Fontaine, the woman with disabilities, the Jamaican woman (possibly) and introduced Lurleen, who is menopausal. [2] Actually, the Fontaine segment has developed into something closer to a stand-up set and constitutes the most overtly political element of *Whoopi: Back*. The start and finish “revive” the *Goldberg: Direct* performance but otherwise the character is assumed and the focus is on jokes and comments covering changes in the US socio-political climate since September 11 and the subsequent war on Iraq. Otherwise, in both productions Goldberg “acts” the characters in a naturalistic fashion, using a minimum of props but undergoing a series of vocal and physical transformations to create the illusion of psychologically motivated individuals. Direct address and audience interaction are employed but mostly to solicit identification with the characters as a means of (gently) questioning stereotypes.

Goldberg’s acting is skilful and technically impressive although, as might be expected, in 2005 her style is less physical but more subtle. During the live show and watching the DVDs I do sometimes find myself identifying with the characters, especially Lurleen. The same age as Goldberg/Lurleen, the menopause is (literally) a hot topic for me and this monologue is essentially a very funny history of “women’s liberation” since the 1960s told through developments in sanitary wear. However, its mild political potential and my pleasure was/is recuperated by the ending which, like most of the other monologues, suffered from a problem identified in Rich’s review of *Goldberg: Direct*. As he remarks, they tend to follow the same ‘primitive [sic] dramatic formula’, starting out ‘friskily but then lurch[ing] towards a sentimental trick ending’ with ‘moments of pathos [which] are often too mechanically ironic and maudlin to provoke’ (Rich, 1984). They follow a loose narrative trajectory within a “laughter and tears format” which moves towards a closure given the status of an emotional and/or commonsense truth, which replaces one stereotype with another. The ethical drawbacks of this format are

evident when Goldberg performs characters distinctly “other” to her own identity, as in the highly sentimental “woman with physical disabilities” segment in both versions.

In *Whoopi: Back* there was some (apparently) spontaneous interaction with the audience between monologues and Rich indicates this was also the case in 1984-5. These interludes have been edited out of both DVDs and in 2005 they were brief and although not entirely insignificant, did not at the time counter the effect of the monologues. In 1984-5, Rich reports that at least twice Goldberg used these moments to state that she didn’t want her ‘putatively threatening outcast characters to make the audience “nervous”’, commenting ‘How one wishes that such disclaimers were actually necessary’ (Rich, 1984). Yet, on the evidence of the DVD there was one section in *Goldberg: Direct* where a character did seem to make the audience ‘nervous’ partly as a consequence of interaction. This was the nine-year old black girl who is determined to grow up to be a white, blue-eyed blonde. Trying to approximate the desired image she wears a shirt on her head, the sleeves hanging down in front to imitate the “swish” of long, straight hair. Much of the monologue focuses on hair and she asks those (few) in the front stalls who have ‘hair like me’, why they are not wearing shirts on their heads. In particular she engages with an African-American man on the front row seated between two white women identified as his friends, who are asked if they don’t mind his hair? Despite the sugary sweet nature of Goldberg’s performance the laughter seems less fulsome than in other segments and the response of some (white) audience members appears strained.

This segment is unquestionably political and raises ethical questions about the representation of otherness in terms of gender and “race”, in which the whole audience, live and televisual, is implicated in differing ways. However, formally neither the little black girl, nor the 2004-5 Fontaine operate in terms of the particular type of interactivity described by Phelan in ‘Witnessing’. This is despite the fact that, since these notions are applied to Warhol’s paintings, like her concept of ‘disappearance’ this cannot necessarily signify material or *literal* interactivity and mutual transformation between an *actual* live/living performer/artist and spectator.

Phelan frames her point by asserting that, on the part of the artists, both *Shadows* and *House* operate on ‘an economy . . . [of] emptying out and erasing of self and the objects used to sustain the self (from food to plastic form)’ (2004: 572). Abramović did engage in some direct interaction with individuals but primarily it appears to be this ‘economy’ (another kind of capital) which promotes interactivity and ‘an extraordinary abundance’ (572). In Abramović’s case the ‘emptying out and erasing’ is both literal and figural. The performance largely consisted of the artist spending twelve days fasting in silence, reading, or writing within an ‘environment’ that included a toilet and shower, or as Phelan puts it ‘theatricalizing the repetitive everyday acts of sleeping, showering, eliminating waste, and sitting at a table’ (574). With Warhol however, this ‘emptying’ out appears to be purely figural, referring to minimalist abstraction and repetitive nature of the paintings. For Phelan, the abstraction of *House* and *Shadows* engages the spectators (collectively yet as individuals) in an effort to grasp the work’s

import but due to this abstraction this effort inevitably fails. An abundance of meaning is produced but no “decidable” or pre-decided meanings (Phelan, 2004: 571). This ‘effort’ (573) and its failure are therefore understood as a material and immaterial part of work, they are what is literally signified by the artist’s turn to abstraction in the first place and simultaneously constitute a figural ‘interactivity’ between artist and spectator (575). In regard to Warhol’s paintings, Phelan also asserts that this process is essentially temporal and ‘environmental’ produced in the moment of time in front of the paintings in the specific conditions of this particular gallery. It is these qualities which brings the paintings into the orbit of live performance, since the effort and failure to decide on meaning in this time and space ‘disappears’ and so ‘cannot be sold and displayed’ (573), “commodified or reproduced.” This holds even for Phelan’s own writing; as she remarks in relation to *House* ‘But I do not think I have begun to approach what really occurred in the performance, primarily because I was a witness to something I did not see and cannot describe. I was in the realm of Warhol’s *Shadows*, seeing the trace of a history of negative reflections that refused to find form’ (2004: 576).

It can, and frequently has been said that on the level of the *figural* exactly this sort of interactivity and potential for transformation (on both sides) occurs in the encounter with *any* text or performance. As Jacques Rancière states in his essay ‘The Emancipated Spectator’, such encounters are always a matter of individuals weaving their way through ‘an unpredictable and irreducible play of associations and dissociations’ in an effort to make meaning, which is always “failing” in a sense because meaning constantly shifts according to context, which is a matter of the temporal and the environmental (Rancière, 2007: 279).

Rancière also argues that paradoxically, the contemporary tendency to privilege certain forms and genres of live performance for politics (or ethical witnessing), can reaffirm something very like Plato’s anti-theatrical prejudice. This is because, he argues, they simply rearrange the same ‘set of relations, resting on some key equivalences and some key oppositions’ (2007: 274) which informed Plato’s thinking and have underpinned attempts to reform the theatre going back at least to Brecht and Artaud and are still current in ‘postmodern disguise’ (271).

Rancière identifies these as equivalences ‘of seeing and passivity, of externality and separation, mediation and simulacrum; oppositions between collective and individual, image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-possession and alienation’ (274). His especial focus is on the way these inform two widely held ‘presuppositions’: (1) that ‘the essence of theater is the essence of the community . . . because, on the stage, real living bodies perform for people who are physically present together in the same place’ (278); and (2) that looking or rather ‘spectatorship’ is essentially passive because it is both ‘the opposite of knowing . . . [and] the opposite of acting’ and as a result ‘It means being in front of an appearance without knowing the conditions of production . . . [and] without any power of intervention’ (272). These presuppositions have motivated the search for forms which “activate” the spectator and ultimately which can “overcome” mimesis, or rather, the spectacle of theatre itself. This is

because it is the mimetic spectacle which “*produces*” the spectator as passive and unknowing, a position implicitly defined in opposition to the artist/reformer, who is therefore framed as “knowing and active.” By extension, it “stands between” all concerned and the making present of (an ideal of) community to itself. The aim is therefore to overcome this mediation, either by foregrounding theatre’s status as spectacle by revealing the conditions of its own production (Brecht) or “transcending” it so that it becomes “life itself” (Artaud) (272-4).

Rancière asserts that these approaches echo the Platonic suspicion of theatre on the basis that it “split” or doubled identity, taking (some of) the citizenry from out of their “proper occupations and places” within the community, literally by taking them away from work and figurally by means of identification. They also often echo Plato’s preference for more abstract and interactive forms such as ‘choreographic’ performance (2007: 272). Indeed, they *also* echo Aristotle’s attempt to ‘reform’ the theatre by determining a hierarchical ordering of forms, genres and mediums and the ‘subjects’ (in both senses of the word) proper to them. In short, Rancière argues that modernist and postmodernist reforms of the theatre reinscribe a neo-Platonic and Aristotelian ‘partition of the sensible’, which “polices” what at any one time is thinkable, audible, sayable, or doable, and thereby of ‘a distribution of the places and of the capacities or the incapacities attached to those places’ (277). He asserts that the ‘set[s] of relations’ grounding these reforms remain ‘allegories of inequality’, even if you reverse or attempt to change the values given to the oppositions and equivalences the structure remains intact (277). For Rancière, the ‘emancipation’ of the spectator starts with the ‘dismissal’ of these oppositions and equivalences and the recognition of the ‘equality of intelligences’ in front of that which ‘binds individuals together . . . [but also] keeps them apart from each other’, which is representation itself, regardless of form, genre or medium (278).

Like Phelan, Rancière is concerned with the relationship between politics and aesthetics and in some ways they have much in common, not least because he has also occasionally used an abstract ideal of theatre as a *figure* for politics by reason of its particular relationship to the space and time. However, Rancière also asserts in no uncertain terms that ‘there is no criterion for establishing an appropriate correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics’ (Rancière 2004: 62).

His critique from ‘The Emancipated Spectator’ may apply to a great many accounts of both political theatre and ethical witnessing within theatre and performance studies but does not entirely seem to apply to Phelan’s discussion in ‘Witnessing’, which posits ‘seeing’ as active and an ‘equality’ between artist and spectator. Nevertheless, in Phelan’s argument these things are conditional on the *artist* ‘emptying themselves out’ by, amongst other things, refusing ‘mimeticism’ as part of an explicit hierarchical ordering of mediums, genres and forms. In fact, Phelan indicates that she is concerned with ‘great art’ (2004: 571). This is entirely her prerogative but it sits strangely with a discourse of ethics concerned with a radically “just” and “open” relation to alterity. She also states a desire to preserve the ‘often arbitrary line between art/life’ without which art risks becoming ‘nothing more than documentation’ (571). Yet, the

correlation that she makes between live performance and the ‘force of the social event’ risks equating the ethics (and politics) of aesthetics with the aesthetics of ethics (and politics). It also risks slippage between Levinas’s *ideal* of the ‘face-to-face encounter’ with the literal face-to-face of live performance in a fashion that potentially equates live performance with (an extreme) ideal of “community.”

References to ‘seeing the trace of a history of negative reflections that refused to find form’ (Phelan, 2004: 576) and ‘the presence of absence’ (573), suggest that Phelan is drawing on a notion of the ‘sublime’ that refers back to Kant and Levinas through Derrida and Lyotard. This version of the sublime recognises the singularity of an event or experience, the ‘what happens’ in the instant of time and space of its occurrence – the ‘what *is*’ – is inevitably lost the moment the event is conceptualised or enters representation. Yet it also assumes that since the very concept of representation implies the existence of its “other”, the “real”, the unrepresentable traces of this experience – or rather its loss – may potentially be apprehended through forms of representation that remark their own failure to represent. As summarised by Thomas A. Vogler:

What the witness communicates in the sublime mode is the failure to encompass; as a single individual, the reader can identify with the poetic point of view of the witness, and can also become a witness. Thus witness will always be a witness of its own inevitable failure, and it is that failure to represent – rather than the actual representation of specific events – that produces the witness-effect. (2003: 197)

In focusing on the process of witnessing or on representation itself, the aim is to communicate the ‘negative trace’ of the *affect* of what the witness cannot represent. This strategy is linked to Levinas in so far as he posits an ethics ‘beyond’ existing thought, ‘being’ or empirical knowledge of the world or others, but based on an irreducible responsibility to ‘the other’ who cannot be identified with any ‘actual’ other in any ‘actual historical situation’ (see Levinas, 1969). The ‘affect’ of the ‘call of the other’ can be apprehended in the face to face encounter with otherness but this affect is of the ‘trace of the infinite’, ‘the good beyond being’, or rather an allegiance of the same to the other, imposed ‘before any exhibition of the other, *preliminary to all consciousness*’ (Levinas: 1981: 25 emphasis added; see also Levinas, 1969). In the Lacanian framework which Phelan cites in ‘Witnessing’, this affect could be understood as the “trace” of the experience of “wholeness” or unity or *absolute community* with “nature” and with (the) other(s) before the “traumatic” splitting of the subject.

However, if this ethics is “outside” the symbolic or the limits of totalising thought, “being” and knowledge, it hard to see how it can be linked to a definable “ontology” of *any* medium or to specific forms or genres. In fact, just as Levinas’ own discourse takes its “authority” from a specific historical trauma, although Phelan constructs live performance as a privileged arena

for exploring this ethics, this version of the 'sublime' is well established in literature, especially poetry.

While in theory associated with 'breaking and remaking' (or for Lyotard 'dis- placements') of form, in this field as in others, it has engendered a 'poetics', a body of works recognisable as a genre ('the poetry of witness') and distinct rhetorical strategies for its criticism. [3] As Vogler points out, as with the meaning of *all* representations the 'witness-effect' is actually guaranteed through protocols of reading and 'authenticating conventions', which include what Foucault termed 'author function' (1991), and indeed the discourses of the sublime and Levinasian-derived ethics. These establish the connections between the abstract and figural within the text and the literal and material "traumatic" event from which the work draws its "authority."

It is notable that Phelan partly authorises her reading of *House* with reference to some of the Abramović's previous work and Abramović's statements on it and therefore to her "intentions" as an artist. Phelan also describes how at the end of *House* Abramović 'came down from the stage and addressed her viewers', to explain that she thought of her piece 'as a response to 9/11' (2004: 576). Phelan continues 'By remaining silent for twelve days and inviting viewers to join her in that silence, she gave some observers the opportunity to dwell within their own memories of that calamitous day for the first time' (576). On these grounds Phelan states that in the piece Abramović was 'Addressing both those who came to see her in the gallery and those who had ceased to see' (576) and speaks of the piece as being situated 'between the specific here and now of twelve days in New York' and 'the more complicated . . . history of war and geography' (576). As Vogler points out 'Silence, of course, is the favourite instance of the sublime' going on to ask 'When one is not speaking, how do we identify the particular thing that the person is *not speaking about*?' (Vogler, 2003: 203). Since Abramović's "intent" was not stated until *after* the performance from Phelan's descriptions it is hard to see how *during* the event the observers were "given" the opportunity to dwell on 9/11 or how it was apparent that Abramović was specifically addressing its absent victims or that it spoke of history, war and geography? Except of course it is reasonable to assume that in 2002 in New York, September 11 was still to the forefront of many people's minds, framing and indeed "transforming" their reading of all sorts of events, past and present. I have to add that for the vast majority of people including a large proportion actually *in* New York at the time, "memories" of September 11 originated from media coverage.

Even if I had seen *House* (which I did not) I would have (literally) no conceivable grounds for questioning the affect it had on Phelan or any other spectator during the live event. Nor would I contest her implication that openness to interpretation may be characteristic of 'great art', nor deny a role to form or medium in the process of making meaning. However, Phelan would be the first to acknowledge that the *ethical and political* meanings she made from *House* are very much before and after the event. My point is that these meanings depend at least in part on "protocols of reading" related to a discourse of "ethical witnessing" which has in fact become part of a 'distribution of the sensible' within literary and performance criticism.

I have to admit that I am only writing this account because originally I saw the live show of *Whoopi: Back*. Nevertheless, I am also arguing that despite its status as a commercial mainstream performance and the drawbacks of aspects of its form, as an *event*, which includes its “mediatisation” before, during and after the show, it is no less capable than *Shadows* or *House* of promoting an abundance of meaning and figurally, the ‘mutual’ transformation of performer and spectator. On these grounds it is also no less concerned with the political, the ethical and the aesthetic.

When I saw the show in New York many US citizens were expressing despair at Bush’s reelection and a fear of the continuation of the repression of dissent that had been part of the nation’s public sphere since September 11. In this context, the overt criticism of US foreign and domestic policy in the Fontaine segment had greater impact than it might otherwise and elsewhere. This was confirmed by a remark (edited out of the DVD) made by Goldberg connecting the presence of the cameras with the theatre being full, implying that this had been a rarity during the run. The bitterness in her tone made me aware that it was odd that just a few days in advance, I had manage to secure tickets for the last night of a Broadway show featuring an Oscar-winning Hollywood star. For me, this comment, which like Abramović’s above pointed beyond/before the performance, set off a retrospective reading process around this show, expanding into the past and the future.

I discovered that in the US Goldberg is noted for her political activism and during the run up to the 2004 election at private fundraiser for John Kerry, the Democrat presidential candidate, she made a joke playing on the fact that “bush” is slang for pubic hair (see Roberts, 2004). This was leaked to the media and provoked public outcry although not as great as that caused a year or so earlier by the Dixie Chicks comments on the war with Iraq. [4] It also lost Goldberg her contract with Slim-Fast, to which her response was ‘The fact that I am no longer spokesperson for Slim-Fast makes me sad but not as sad as someone trying to punish me for exercising my right as an American to speak my mind’ (quoted in Boykin, 2004). It would seem that erstwhile fans continued this punishment by staying away from this show or perhaps did not wish to be associated with the views expressed within it. In any case, the live show was already as much a political event and for some of those who attended (and those who decided not to) an ethical event, as a theatrical one.

The same might be said for *Goldberg: Direct*, since I doubt that in 1984 there were many, if any, one person shows on Broadway by an African-American woman who was not primarily a singer – nor as the performance itself makes clear, on US television. Rich never mentions this but it may explain why Goldberg worried that audiences could find the characters ‘threatening.’ Watching the nine- year old black girl on DVD I wonder about its impact when originally broadcast, especially since one of her recurring complaints is that ‘You don’t see people who look like me on television’ (HBO, 2005). Goldberg was far from alone amongst African-American comics of her generation in making this point but I would guess that she was

the first female, African-American performer to do so *on* television. In a small way this character might be said to have had a role in the disrupting the 'distribution of the sensible' within theatre *and* television in a manner not equivalent to but not unconnected to the realm of politics, where a more radical disruption might be traced back to Rosa Parks. For Rancière there is 'one universal of politics' which is the presupposition of equality 'of one speaking being with any other speaking being.' As a presupposition this is something that must be tested out and verified continuously and indeed it is the moment testing this out, or rather its 'staging' which for him *constitutes* 'politics.' This process can occur at any time or place and take any form but is process of disidentification and identification, literally an 'acting out' that is temporal and environmental (see Rancière, 1999: 29-30 and Rancière, 2004: 12-45). In any case by 2004 there had been enough of a political shift in US television for Goldberg to say at the press preview that there was no longer any need to perform the little black girl. Moreover, if Fontaine is still a junkie, he is noticeably more confident of his right to speak as an "ordinary American citizen" than he was in 1984-5. For me, between them (literally and figurally) these two performances open up as vast and complicated history as Abramović's performance opened up for Phelan. I cannot begin to detail the play of associations and dissociations that they set off or the way they have affected and been affected by my experience/reading of subsequent events but will reiterate that *some* of these meanings came to a temporary pause with the inauguration of Barack Obama, which like so many in the world, I saw on television.

Returning from the nine-year-old black girl in *Goldberg: Direct* back to Fontaine in *Whoopi: Back*, I became aware that part of Fontaine's critique is aimed at the media and especially television. For example, he refers to the broadcasting of images of the corpses of Saddam Hussein's sons Uday and Ousey in 2003 asking 'When did we become the barbarians?' Towards the end of the segment he summed up through jokes aimed at the lack of transparency in the Bush administration's handling of the war but also in the reporting of events by US networks. Singing an extract from The Police song *Every Breath You Take* (also called *I'll Be Watching You*) he states 'I'll be watching you – George.' He says he would encourage us to sing along but points out that "we" are on camera and 'they will come after you, be clear they *will* come after you'. Instead he asks us to pass this message along to people we know one person at a time. We, the live audience and the future televisual one, are asked literally, to bear witness not to *this show* and its meanings as a "live event" but to the significant historical events in process beyond the theatre. However, since as the Fontaine set stresses most of us only have access to these events through the media, the assumption is that if "we" are actively 'watching' George, we are simultaneously actively 'watching' and holding to account the media itself.

Intrinsic to the widespread academic suspicion of television is often not the economics of its production but the presupposition that as a medium it renders its spectators "passive" and operates against any sense of community. Yet, alongside the internet, it is arguably this medium more than any other that has given us, as Phelan's puts it, 'a more general sense of connection to one another that exceeds simple geophysical, ideological or cultural proximity' (2004: 577).

By consequence, it has also made it hard for more of us, regardless of place or occupation, collectively and as individuals, to avoid engaging with the ethics and politics of representation as that which *both* unites and divides us and which also, whether live or mediated, is always part of the “policing” of what is thinkable seeable, audible, doable and sayable.

In fact, television has been held responsible for shaping the twentieth century as a period of “excessive witnessing”, in which, to extend Hal Foster’s 1996 argument, the experience of ‘trauma’ is sometimes publicly deployed to confer ‘authority’ and ‘guarantee the subject’ (see Douglass and Vogler, 2003: 36-7). Taking the “subject” in the broadest sense of the term, it seems to me the same principle might be in play in accounts from theatre and performance studies that construct the medium of performance as a ideal(ised) site for thinking or even “staging” ethics or politics. I am especially concerned that in such approaches there can be a degree of abstraction and decontextualisation that allows for slippage between figural and literal resistance and subversion and/or between the ethics of “witnessing” a performance and “witnessing” an actual significant event. Sometimes self-reflexivity can signify narcissism. Which takes me to my last point.

In *Goldberg: Direct* the Fontaine monologue saw him taking a trip to the Anne Frank house in Amsterdam and subsequently taking on as a guiding principle her famous diary entry ‘In spite of everything, I still believe there is goodness in everyone’ (HBO, 2005). Twenty years later Fontaine recalls this trip but now focuses on a photographic exhibition of Amsterdam before, during and after the war. This develops into a markedly ironic speech. Using the structures and cadences of traditional African-American oratory, he says that looking at these photographs made him proud to be an American ‘knowing that in America no one would stand by and let someone kick down your door in and drag you out for speaking out against the government’ or for your religious or sexual preferences, ending by saying ‘I knew it, because I’d seen how far we’d come’ (HBO, 2005). He finishes once again citing the Anne Frank Diary entry but now he says he is ‘not so sure’, ‘I’m nervous about people now’ and ‘it’s sad because this was such a great nation – perhaps its going to be alright – but I’m not so sure’ (HBO, 2005).

There is much that could be said about this speech but my main interest is that during the live show, accepting it was after all a *performance*, I was convinced that it had a certain weight and sincerity. However, afterwards I saw the sentimental 1984-5 version and read Elyse Sommer’s description of it as a ‘tedious and feeble attempt to add a serious undertone to what is basically an irreverent stand-up routine’ (Sommer, 2004). As a result, I became concerned ‘ethically’ about its dependence on the citation of the Holocaust in the overall context of a popular commercial show.

The connection between Levinas and indeed all contemporary notions of ethical witnessing, the event and the sublime, is of course, that they refer back to the Holocaust as a point of “rupture” that engendered a series of crises in the understanding of concepts of history, truth, progress and the nature of the human subject. This notion of “rupture” marks the status of the

Holocaust as a singularity, unspeakable, beyond any human rationality, undoing and rendering null and void all existing modes of bearing witness to history, in short, the unrepresentable “limit” of representation.

Yet as Alain Badiou notes in the Europe and the US the Nazi regime and the Holocaust are in fact ‘constantly invoked, compared, used to schematise every circumstances in which one want to produce an effect of the awareness of Evil’ (Badiou, 2001: 63). In effect it is constantly represented as *the* Event through which the majority of subsequent and indeed preceding, traumatic political and historical Events are interpreted. In a sense then there was no need for Gillian Rose to develop her critique of what she terms ‘Holocaust piety’, which she indicates, insists on ‘silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of “ineffability”’ (Rose, 1996: 43). Except, she points out how this ‘piety’ has worked against an analysis of the material (temporal and environmental) social and political conditions under which the Holocaust occurred. In addition, Vogler with Rose, Badiou and many others, points out that without ‘mitigating the horror or the reality of the Holocaust’, constructing it as *unique* contributes to ‘an implicit system of control of trauma discourse in which “we” are always identified with the innocent victims, empathizing with the horror of their suffering’ (Vogler, 2003: 202). By extension, Badiou argues that in practice the contemporary ethics of the “other”, whether Kantian or Levinasian tend to come down to a condescending, even contemptuous identification of the “Other” as a traumatised victim’ (Badiou, 2004: 11-14). Alternatively, Vogler continues ‘We thereby create a secure place of innocence to view atrocities from, atrocities that are always acts of an Other, different in essence from ourselves’ (Vogler, 2003: 202). Hence, he suggests the vast body of literary works on the Holocaust in the US and Europe, but a scarcity of those on other atrocities and genocides – historical and recent – where it might be harder to distance ourselves from ‘Evil’. In short, as Rose suggests, Holocaust piety may function ‘to mystify something we dare not understand because we fear that it may be all too understandable’ (Rose 1996: 43). This is how much “we” as subjects may still have in common with the “barbarians”, the Nazi aggressor. On this point, for example, it is notable how rapidly the deconstruction of the enlightenment subject and the aesthetics associated with it, came to signify progressiveness and progress (how far we’ve come) in the field of performance as elsewhere.

Ultimately, I think the *Goldberg: Direct* Fontaine speech had traces of a popular mode of ‘Holocaust piety’ but not the *Whoopi: Back* version. In this instance, reference to this Event occurs as part of an identification as an American citizen that recognises that “we” might not have come so far, may (still) be the barbarians. This acknowledgment is all the more powerful spoken from a position (literally and figurally, Goldberg and Fontaine) where the right to be identified as a “proper” American citizen was/is both hard won and fragile.

I am not suggesting that ‘Holocaust piety’ is intentionally or consciously in play in any particular contemporary account of witnessing and performance let alone Phelan’s, which is a far more subtle argument than my summarising allows.

Except, intertextually, performatively, through the play of associations and dissociations, such thinking is at the core of the contemporary discourse of ethical witness. As such, it calls for some careful unpacking, especially when it is linked to a privileging of specific mediums, forms and genres in ways that could in effect, constitute ‘a distribution of the sensible’ within the field, that under the sign of ‘ethics’, excludes certain types of *political* subjects (in both senses of the word) on the basis of their mode of speech.

Endnotes

- [1] For general overviews of the ideas I am summarising in relation to Lyotard, Derrida, and Levinas see Bill Readings (1991) and Simon Critchley (1992).
- [2] *Possibly* the Jamaican woman because I had forgotten her entirely until I saw the 1984-5 DVD and she does not appear in the DVD of the 2005 version, nor is she mentioned in reviews. This might therefore be a false memory created by the 1984-5 DVD.
- [3] On Lyotard’s ‘dis-placements’ see Readings (1991:72).
- [4] See Janelle Reinelt (2004) for information and analysis of the Dixie Chicks affair.

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