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The Accident and the Account:

Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre
and Performance Studies

One of the most famous witnesses in theatre and performance studies is Bertolt Brecht's eyewitness, who stands on the street corner giving an account of how a traffic accident has just happened. The eyewitness appears in Brecht's essay 'The Street Scene' (1964) as well as his poem 'On Everyday Theatre' (1979). In the essay, he argues that epic theatre:

can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place. The bystander may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may 'see things a different way'; the point is that the demonstrator acts the behavior of driver or victim or both in such a way that bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident. (Brecht, 1964: 121)

While Brecht refers to only one eyewitness, it has always struck me that there are, in fact, several witnesses within the Street Scene: the eyewitness- demonstrator; the driver; the victim; the bystander who 'sees things a different way'; and, perhaps, the bystander who sees nothing at all. Similarly, I have always thought that there are two scenes here: the accident and the account. Within the scene of the accident, witnessing is a mode of seeing whereas within the scene of the account, witnessing is not only a mode of seeing but also of saying and, for the bystanders, a mode of listening. In this way what starts as a small and simple scene with one eyewitness, rapidly becomes two scenes, each dense with many witnesses and many types of witnessing. Yet despite the diversity this scene, or scenes, represents for modes of witnessing in theatre and performance studies, we still have only one word at our disposal – *witness*.

While Brecht was writing in the late-1930s and early-1940s, it was not until the mid-1990s that the term *witness* gained currency in theatre and performance studies. Within theatre studies the term has been associated with the reemergence of documentary and verbatim theatres and the newly reinvigorated discourse on these practices. Indeed, some scholars have

renamed the genre the ‘theatre of witness’ (Schaefer, 2003c) or the ‘theatre of testimony’ (Salz, 1996), while others have described it in terms of ‘performing testimony’ (Salverson, 2001b). Within performance studies, however, the term has been associated with performance art and its spectators. Together, the two disciplines have used the term to describe practically every participant involved in the process of making and watching theatre: the writer; the actor or performer; the character; the dramaturg; and the spectator. [1] Hence currency has not necessarily created clarity; indeed I argue that it has caused confusion more than anything else. This confusion has been compounded by the fact that as these witnesses multiply, the claims about them amplify. The theatre itself is increasingly being positioned as a place, or medium, with a particular ability to witness and to produce others as witnesses. [2] In short, there is a growing sense that the word *witness* is becoming a generalised, semi-sacralised term that scholars employ when trying to emphasise the historical import or emotional impact of a particular performance without thinking through the significance of the term itself.

The emergence of the witness in theatre and performance studies coincides with the appearance of witnessing within the humanities more generally and with the emergence of trauma studies more specifically. The seminal texts of trauma studies were all published in the early and mid-1990s: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony* was published in 1992; Cathy Caruth’s edited collection *Trauma* was published in 1995 and her monograph *Unclaimed Experience* in 1996. This prompts Peggy Phelan to suggest that, more than any other discipline, trauma studies has structured performance studies’ conception of witnessing (1999b: 13). Certainly the presence of Caruth in Phelan’s own work, along with the citations of Felman and Laub in the pioneering work of Karen Malpede and Diana Taylor would support this claim. [3] With the recent proliferation of witnesses as well as the increasingly ambitious claims being made about the witnessing power of theatre and performance, the time seems ripe for a return to trauma studies. [4] That trauma studies is approaching its twentieth anniversary only adds to the sense of occasion.

This article, then, is part summary, part cartography, and part taxonomy – charting the discourse as it currently stands and in doing so developing a preliminary taxonomy of spectatorial witnessing in theatre and performance studies. It focuses on the discourse of spectatorial witnessing for several reasons. First, the dialogue about the spectator as a witness is by far the largest and liveliest within the wider discourse on theatrical witnessing. Second, perhaps because it is the largest, it is also the most inconsistent. When compared with the conversation on the writer as a witness, for instance, which is reasonably clear about who is a witness and who is not, the discourse on the spectator looks less coherent. In order to establish this taxonomy of spectatorial witness I synthesise the twin vocabularies of theatre and performance studies; in order to refine it I draw on the some of the distinctions at work within trauma studies. Using Brecht’s *Street Scene* as both an anchor and an allegory, I argue that there are currently two distinct notions of witnessing at work within theatre and performance studies: one that positions the witness at the scene of the accident and another that positions the witness at the scene of the account. To put it in the terms of trauma studies, while some

scholars conceive of the spectator as a primary witness, others consider him or her as a secondary witness.

Beyond providing a more precise vocabulary, this taxonomy also encourages us to reconsider two of the truisms of theatrical witnessing: that witnessing is a mode of “active spectatorship” and that witnessing is a mode of “ethical spectatorship.” Constantly referred to and rarely defined, the concept of active spectatorship is causing witnessing theory to stall. [5] This is because it assumes: (a) that there is such a thing as passive spectatorship; (b) that active and passive spectatorship are clearly distinguishable; and (c) that active spectatorship is, by definition, superior to passive spectatorship. Yet theories of spectatorship, which are strangely and conspicuously absent from the discourse on witnessing, have roundly rejected all three of these assumptions. Take, for instance, Jacques Rancière’s article ‘The Emancipated Spectator,’ where he writes:

The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He connects what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages, in other kinds of spaces. He makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him. She participates in the performance if she is able to tell her own story about the story that is in front of her. (Rancière, 2007: 277)

When the spectator is understood as active and spectatorship is understood as an activity, then the notion of “passive spectatorship” reveals itself as a contradiction in terms. Once this first assumption comes undone the second soon follows, for if spectatorship is defined as an activity then “active spectatorship” (witnessing) becomes an active activity, which is to say, a tautology. Finally, the third assumption falls away as well, since it is impossible to say whether a tautology is superior to an oxymoron or vice versa. The absence of Rancière’s name is indicative of a wider failure of witnessing theory to engage with spectatorship theory, which has led to the absurdity of defining witnessing as “active spectatorship.” Instead of asserting that witnessing is a mode of active spectatorship, we need to shift the terms of the debate and ask ‘If spectatorship is always already active, then what is witnessing?’ That is, we need to ask ‘If spectatorship is an activity, then what sort of spectatorial activities are specific to witnessing?’ I argue that this taxonomy helps us to see that the word *witnessing* currently refers to a range of spectatorial practices or activities.

Like active spectatorship, “ethical spectatorship” is a constant refrain in witnessing theory. [6] Yet, in the same way that theories of spectatorship trouble the first truism of the discourse, theories of trauma trouble the second. Within theatre and performance studies, the witness is assumed to be ethical, however trauma studies indicates that while witnessing *can* be an ethical mode of spectatorship, it is not necessarily. Take, for instance, the person who sees the Street Scene and who says nothing about it. Wandering off into the distance, lost to history or at least to Brecht, there is a witness whose actions are not necessarily ethical. It is precisely

this *not necessarily* that we have yet to come to terms with in theatre and performance studies and this article argues that in order to nuance our understanding of witnessing, we need to look for the ethical nuances as well.

Finally, and more radically, I posit that theories of witnessing might actually move the conversation away from notions of activity and ethics towards notions of temporality. More than anything else, trauma studies reminds us that witnessing is temporally delayed. That is, we are spectators in the moment but witnesses in and through time. In essence, when witnessing a performance the spectator experiences a sort of “after-affect” rather than simply experiencing affect during the performance or the after effects of that affect. The affect itself does not arrive during the performance but afterwards.

The Accident: The Spectator as Primary Witness

In his book *Certain Fragments*, writer and practitioner Tim Etchells states that:

The art-work that turns us into witnesses leaves us, above all, unable to stop thinking, talking and reporting what we’ve seen. We’re left, like the people in Brecht’s poem who’ve witnessed the road accident, still stood [sic] on the street corner discussing what happened, borne on by our responsibility to events. (Etchells, 1999: 18)

Initially, it seems as if Etchells is simply agreeing with Brecht – he is arguing that theatre should aspire to have the same sort of impact on its audience as an accident has. However, it may be that Etchells in fact misreads the accident (though it has proven to be a productive misreading to be sure). For Brecht very clearly states that ‘The street demonstrator’s performance is essentially repetitive. The event has taken place; what you are seeing now is a repeat. . . . There is no question but [sic] that the street-corner demonstrator has been through an “experience,” but he is not out to make his demonstration serve as an “experience” for the audience’ (1964: 122). In contrast, an ‘experience’ seems to be precisely what Etchells is aiming for, as evidenced by the performers he references as well as the more explicit definitions of witnessing he offers.

The first performers he refers to include Chris Burden, Ron Athey, and Stelarc. Various shooting, piercing, mutilating, and suspending themselves, these three artists produce ‘events in which extreme versions of the body in pain, in sexual play and in shock demand repeatedly of those watching “be here, be here, be here”’ (Etchells, 1999: 18). However, Etchells does not limit witnessing to extreme events, elsewhere he refers to Alistair MacLennan, Brian Catling, and Bobby Baker, whose ‘ritualistic slowness,’ ‘simple presence,’ and durational performance invite the spectator ‘to be here and be now, to feel exactly what it is to be in this place and this time’ (18). In all of these performances, the witness is someone who is spatiotemporally present at an event, or more accurately, spatiotemporally and self-consciously present at an

event. Etchells confirms this in his more explicit statements on witnessing, where he asserts that 'to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one's own place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker' (17). In other words, the spectator experiences this event as event rather than as a 'repeat' of a prior event. To put it otherwise, although Brecht argues that theatre should give an account of the accident, Etchells suggests that the theatre should aspire not to give an account of the accident, but to *be* the accident itself. For Etchells, the performance event should function in the same way as the accidental event does – as a type of trauma that renders us speechless, then garrulous.

In positioning the spectator at the scene of trauma, Etchells' account echoes that of Peggy Phelan. In her discussion of Marina Abramović's performance *House*, Phelan says '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' (2004: 576). Phelan's missing of the event recalls Caruth's description of trauma as 'an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor' (1996: 4). Like the subject's experience of trauma, Phelan's experience of Abramović is premature ('I do not think I have begun to approach what really occurred'), unforeseen even unseen ('I was a witness to something I did not see'), haunting and repetitive ('I attended the performance on two different days, gave a talk about it . . . and have written about it here and elsewhere') (2004: 576). For Phelan, as for Etchells, the performance event is a traumatic event, rendering her voiceless then voluble. In this way, their witnessing – in the seeing, speaking, recounting, and rewriting of the event – comes to resemble a sort of acting out whereby the subject is 'haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes – scenes in which the past returns . . . the tenses implode, and it is as if one were back in the past reliving the traumatic scene' (LaCapra, 2001: 21).

Though they do not use the phrase, it seems clear that both Etchells and Phelan understand the spectator as a primary witness. I am borrowing the term *primary witness* from trauma studies where it signifies, in essence, someone who is present at the scene of the traumatic event. In the words of Jacques Derrida, the witness is 'the one who will have been present. He or she will have been present at, in the present, to the thing to which he [sic] testifies. The motif of presence, of being-present or of being-in-presence, always turns out to be at the center of these determinations' (2005: 74). Yet, though they agree with Derrida on presence, Etchells and Phelan seem to differ on self-presence. For Derrida, the witness can only ever claim to have been present at an event 'on the condition of being and having been sufficiently *self-present as such* . . . sufficiently conscious of himself, sufficiently self-present to know what he is talking about' (2005: 79).

Likewise, Etchells insists that despite their shock, spectators retain their self-presence and their consciousness of where they are – 'be here, be here, be here', 'be here and be now' – and

what they are doing – ‘to feel the weight of things and one’s own place in them’ (1999: 18, 17). In contrast, Phelan seems to suggest that she was not self-present during the performance of *House* and that she only recovered her self-presence in the aftermath. Perhaps one way of explaining this difference is to say that Etchells aligns the spectator with the bystander to the accident, Phelan aligns the spectator with the survivor of the accident.

Theories of primary witness problematise the notion that witnessing is a mode of ‘active spectatorship’ in several ways. First, theories of traumatic witnessing blur the line between activity and passivity. Take, for instance, the viewing experience of the survivor or the victim in the Street Scene. On the one hand, it is arguable that this is an example of passive spectatorship since trauma involves being without agency, being objectified, and acted upon. On the other hand, the survivor’s viewing experience can be read as an instance of absolute activity, an immersion so intense that it results in the dissolution of subjectivity. In the words of Rancière, ‘you can change the values given to each position without changing the meaning of the oppositions themselves’ (2007: 277). Here each of the three assumptions underpinning the definition of witnessing as a mode active spectatorship come undone: (1) it is not clear that this actually *is* active spectatorship; (2) if it is active spectatorship then it is not clearly distinguishable from passive spectatorship; and (3) it is not clear that it is a superior mode of spectatorship. Rather than establishing or reinforcing the distinction between active and passive spectator, I argue that theories of primary witnessing actually point to different modes or degrees of activity. For the spectator positioned as victim or survivor, witnessing is an unconscious, unregulated activity (as Phelan explains). For the spectator positioned as a bystander, however, witnessing is both a conscious and self-conscious activity (as Etchells explains). Particularly adept productions may move the spectator through a range of primary witnessing positions including survivor, bystander, or even perpetrator. [7]

In addition, theories of primary witnessing problematise the notion that witnessing is a mode of “ethical spectatorship.” If we become witnesses in and through the accident, then we need to ask: what exactly is ethical about watching an accident? The answer is not clear cut. Indeed, there are strong cultural taboos around looking inappropriately at an accident or “rubbernecking.” Furthermore, what exactly is ethical about watching a “deliberate accident,” such as Burden’s shooting, Athey’s piercing, or Abramović’s starving? More broadly, what does the term “ethical” actually mean here? Even Phelan admits that although ‘staging a body in extreme pain [can], in and of itself, solicit spectators’ compassion. . . . compassion is *not necessarily* ethical and pain voluntarily endured is a different act than, say, torture’ (1999b: 13, emphasis added). In our eagerness to promote the ethical potential of performance, it is precisely this *not necessarily* that we have yet to come to terms with in theatre and performance studies. Though primary witnessing is implicated in the ethics of vision and visibility, it is *not necessarily* an ethical mode of spectatorship. Nor does it follow that the performance being witnessed is *inherently* ethical or, indeed, that it has any links to notions of ethics. In fact, it may be precisely the ethical ambiguity of a performance that provokes the audience; that causes them either to be self- consciously present at the event or unconsciously absent from

it. It is this provocation – i.e. what is it to watch, what is it to watch pain, what is it to watch the performance of pain, what is it to have pain performed for your benefit? – that causes the spectator to miss the event, rehearse the event, and recover the event in an attempt to finally redeem the (ethically ambiguous) event. [8]

In short, scholars who theorise the spectator as a primary witness place the spectator at the scene of the accident or at the scene of trauma. Unsurprisingly, then, this type of witnessing is often associated with performance art, as the names in this section (Burden, Athey, Stelarc, Abramović) suggest. In Michael Kirby's terms, primary witnessing is associated with not-acting rather than acting and attempts to move the spectator beyond the 'matrices of pretended or represented character, situation, place, and time' (1984: 99). Paradoxically, this not-acting of the performer produces a sort of acting (out) in spectators, as they repeat the scene internally and verbally, again and again. In a way, primary witnessing is almost an Artaudian mode of spectatorship – an attempt to dissolve representation, an approach to towards the real. In this obsessive pursuit of the impossible referent, of what Phelan calls the 'Real-real,' the primary witness to trauma and performance are one and the same (1993: 3).

The Account: The Spectator as Secondary Witness

While Etchells conceives of the spectator as Brecht's eyewitness-demonstrator, Freddie Rokem conceives of the spectator as one of the bystanders. Indeed, in his book *Performing History*, Rokem explicitly states that 'the actor performing a historical figure on the stage in a sense also becomes a witness of the historical event. . . . in order to make it possible for the spectators, the "bystanders" in the theatre, to become secondary witnesses' (2000: 9). He repeats this formulation in his more recent article 'Witnessing Woyzeck' where he argues that 'the spectators in the auditorium are, in a sense, "second-degree" witnesses, one step removed from the fictional world' (2002: 169). Though he does not define the terms 'second-degree' and 'secondary' witness, Rokem employs them in the same way that trauma studies scholars do. In trauma studies the secondary witness is typically defined as someone who is 'a witness to the testimonies of others . . . [a participant] not in the events, but in the account given of them . . . as the immediate receiver of these testimonies' (Felman and Laub, 1991: 75-76). [9] In sum, the spectator who is a secondary witness is a witness to an account of the accident rather than to the accident itself; a witness to testimony rather than a witness to trauma.

This is precisely how Rokem and a range of other theorists, such as Diana Taylor and Emma Govan, theorise the spectator as witness. Indeed, in her book *Disappearing Acts*, Taylor cites Laub's definition and reiterates that she understands the witness to be 'the listener rather than the see-er' (1997: 27). Writing about the work of Yuyachkani, Taylor argues that a performance that produces witnesses 'engages with history without necessarily being a "symptom of history"' and the best performances 'enter into dialogue with a history of trauma without themselves being traumatic. These are carefully constructed works that create a critical distance for "claiming" experience and enabling, as opposed to "collapsing" witnessing'

(2003: 210). Similarly, in her account of Laurie Anderson's *Happiness* and the Atlas Group's *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair*, Govan argues that the spectators become 'witness[es] to the artist's act of witnessing and, as such, are actively engaged with the material but in a way that allows space of reflection' (2005: 58). She calls this 'layered witnessing' and argues that it can be 'an effective way in which to negotiate traumatic material' (58).

Unlike the category of primary witness, the category of secondary witness is less splintered and there are few, if any, subcategories such as victim, perpetrator, or bystander. Yet theories of secondary witnessing offer theatre and performance studies something besides a welter of subtle distinctions. First, by identifying Rokem, Taylor and Govan's theories of witnessing as implicit theories of secondary witnessing it becomes clear that their versions of spectatorial witnessing conflict with Etchells' version. Indeed, they are almost completely contradictory. Whereas Etchells argues that to be a witness in the theatre is to experience an event, Taylor and Govan argue that to be witness is to hear an account of events. Whereas Etchells aims for immersion, Taylor and Govan aim for 'critical distance' and 'space for reflection.' Whereas Etchells and Phelan state that witnessing produces a sort of acting out in the spectator, Taylor and Govan are adamant that theatre should enable a sort of working through. Of course, theatre can do both but Taylor and Govan permit the play to act out so that the spectator can work through; they do not want the theatre to act out and in doing so cause the spectator to act out too.

Theories of secondary witnessing, like theories of primary witnessing, problematise the notion of the "active spectator." On the one hand, listening is passive since we do not have "earlids" in the same way that we have eyelids and we often have no choice but to listen. On the other hand, as anyone who has tuned out of a lecture will attest, the best listening is active, involving intense concentration. Once again, as Rancière suggests, the values are easily inverted and the conversation easily stalled (2007: 277). Once again, as I suggest, rather than clarifying the difference between active and passive spectatorship, what theories of witnessing actually do is to point to different modes of activity. Whereas primary witnessing is principally a visual activity, secondary witnessing is mainly an auditory activity.

In shifting the emphasis from seeing to listening, theories of secondary witnessing also shift the emphasis from the ethics of visibility to what Alice Rayner has termed the ethics of listening (1993). In addition, secondary witnessing implicates the spectator in the ethics of repetition. (Here it becomes apparent that we probably need a taxonomy of ethics to sit alongside a taxonomy of witness since the concept of ethics – like the concept of witness – is being deployed rather indiscriminately.) Would it be ethical to stand demonstrating how an accident has happened while the victim is haemorrhaging on the pavement? Would it be ethical for the eyewitness to get into a car and run over another pedestrian in an attempt to demonstrate *exactly* how the accident happened? Our instincts suggest not – the repetition of the accident should not reinjure its survivors nor should it injure those who listen to the account – and the timing and type of repetition becomes crucial in these calculations.

While it is easy enough to agree with Taylor and Govan that theatre should not reenact the traumatic event or reproduce the experience of trauma in the spectator, the ethics of repetition deserve further interrogation for it is not at all clear what the ethics of retestifying (as opposed to simply testifying) are. Indeed, there are immense cultural anxieties around repeating testimony – hence accusations in court of having “rehearsed” the witness and the many rules around hearsay. Nor are these anxieties limited to the courtroom, as evidenced by Vivian Patraka’s claim that Peter Weiss’s production of *The Investigation* ‘may well impugn the genre of survivor testimony itself’ (1999: 102). Patraka does not elaborate on these concerns in much detail but her anxiety seems to stem from the fact that the actor becomes a sort of false witness. Though numerous scholars use the term false witness, I am borrowing the term from Dominick LaCapra, who defines the false witness as someone who takes up a subject position which does not belong to them. He writes

[c]ertain statements or even entire orientations may seem appropriate for someone in a given subject-position but not in others. (It would, for example, be ridiculous if I tried to assume the voice of Elie Wiesel or Saul Friedlander. There is a sense in which I have no right to these voices.) (1994: 46)

In short, the false witness appropriates an inappropriate subject position. In acting as if s/he is a primary witness, the actor does precisely this. This, in turn, risks producing the spectator as a false witness, encouraging them to think that they are hearing this testimony first-hand when in fact it is second-hand at best. [10]

Presumably Patraka would prefer it if the survivors themselves were present on the stage to tell us their stories. Yet this is not necessarily more ethical. Indeed, having to testify repeatedly may actually retraumatise the primary witness. For instance, Julie Salverson relates the story of a former refugee who testified to his experiences on stage, only to find himself retraumatized by the experience rather than reaffirmed (1996: 187). In such cases, says Salverson, primary witnesses can find themselves ‘caught recycling a story they may wish they had never remembered’ (1996: 188). It is hard to see how watching traumatised subjects retraumatise themselves for the purpose of performance can be called ethical.

Paradoxically, it may be that the practice of false witnessing is more “ethical” since it relieves the primary witness of the burden of repetition and reduces the risk of retraumatization. Once again, the ethics of witnessing in the theatre emerge as more ambiguous than we might care to admit.

In sum, secondary witnessing involves listening to an actor or performer deliver their own primary testimony (as in the case of Laurie Anderson) or deliver testimony on behalf of a prior primary witness (as in the case of most verbatim theatre). Theorists of secondary witnessing argue that repeating testimony is more ethical than reenacting or reproducing the traumatic

event because it does not reinjure the participants in the accident, nor does it injure the addressee of the account.

The Accidental Account: The Spectator as Primary and Secondary Witness

Inevitably, the differences between primary and secondary witnessing have been overstated and like any binary it begins to undo itself almost immediately. Indeed, the attentive reader will have noticed that whereas I categorised bystanders as primary witnesses, Rokem categorised them as secondary witnesses. But is it possible to be both a primary and secondary witness to an event? Within trauma studies, Laub argues that it is, describing himself as both a primary witness to the Holocaust (a child survivor) and as a secondary witness to it (a witness to the testimonies of other survivors) (1992: 75-6). Following Laub, we can say that within the Street Scene the bystander who sees things differently and then listens to the eyewitness-demonstrator's account of the event is both a primary witness (present at the scene of trauma) and a secondary witness (present at the scene of testimony).

But though Laub suggests that it is possible to shift witnessing modes after the event, is it possible to shift witnessing modes during the event? Rokem suggests that it is in his account of *Arbeit macht frei vom Totland Europa*. In a performance he calls 'both extreme and exciting,' he argues that the actress, Semadar Yaron-Ma'ayan, starts her performance as the character Selma in a testimonial mode but eventually moves into a mode that is more traumatic (2000: 66). Set in a museum, she starts the performance as a tour guide, explaining how the ghettos were established and pointing to various objects, documents and photographs. However, as the show progresses over five hours, she slowly sheds this character while washing the floors, singing Nazi and Israeli songs, and suspending herself from the ceiling. We see footage of her having a number tattooed on her arm, just like those which can be seen on survivors, and eventually find her completely naked on the table in the posture of the starving Muselman wrenching a piece of bread from her vagina. Here 'the borders between character and actress break down' (72) and the performance goes beyond an imitation of the real towards the real itself (as Burden, Athey, and Stelarc do). In Michael Kirby's terms, what starts as a matrixed performance slowly sheds any reference to the matrices of time and place until the actress is involved in task-based performance only, though they are truly hideous tasks. For this reason, Rokem argues that 'the witness-actress . . . transforms the spectators of the performance itself into the witnesses of human suffering' (74).

Rebecca Schneider describes something similar, though not identical, in her reading of Karen Finley, where what starts as a testimonial account becomes increasingly agitated, to the point where the testimony becomes an ordeal in itself. Schneider writes:

More like testimony or religious/political witnessing than aesthetic performance, Finley's monologues, both by the ribald content and her testimonial style, disallow conventional distance by which a spectator sits back

and suspends disbelief or 'appreciates' art. Rather, disbelief is the constant question that bangs at the door of the viewer – I dare you to disbelieve, Finley seems to say, when I'm shoving this material squarely in your face. (1997: 100-1)

Here, as in *Arbeit macht frei vom Totland Europa*, the secondary witness is not allowed to remain distanced, but is dared, enticed, and then finally dragged closer – too close – in order to become a primary witness. What remains unclear in these accounts is whether the same performance can produce some spectators as primary witnesses and others as secondary witnesses. The possibility of multiple responses raises yet more complications for the claims that witnessing is, by definition, an active and ethical mode of spectatorship. It also challenges any attempt to develop a taxonomy of spectatorial witness and yet it is only in and through this taxonomy that I have been able to identify and describe these shifts in spectatorial response. In the words of Salverson, 'Without a language that brings together questions of ethics, mimesis, and testimony we are left with an atmosphere of mystification and cannot clarify how performances operate to educate, to envision, to relieve pain, or simply to reinscribe stories of victimization' (2001a: 120). Similarly, without a wider language of witness we cannot articulate how particular performances produce their spectators as witnesses.

The Account of the Account: The Spectator as Tertiary Witness

While most theorists implicitly define the spectatorial witness as a primary or secondary witness, there are some who position the spectator as a sort of tertiary witness. Typically, they propose one of two ways in which a spectator can become a third party to the witnessing encounter: either spatially or temporally. In spatial configurations of tertiary witnessing, the spectator is neither a witness to trauma, nor an addressee of testimony, but a witness to 'the act of witnessing as it takes place between characters' (Malpede, 1996b: 275). This process allows the audience to see:

how witnessing affects all parties to the tale, and their position outside the dialogue allows audience members to move between empathic identification with the body of the one whose testimony is being offered and the one whose body is being entered by the testimony. The audience becomes not only witness to the testimony, but witness to the witness of the testimony. (1996b: 275)

This mode of spectatorship or, more accurately, meta-spectatorship, also appears in Rokem's article 'Witnessing Woyzeck' in which he argues that witnessing occurs when the spectator watches a character or actor watching the action on stage. This on-stage spectator 'serves as a mirror image, a kind of filter or lens, or focalizer for the real spectators watching the performance' (2002: 168). In turn, this 'invitation, or sometimes even seduction, subliminally induces the spectator to reflect or react to his or her own role and experience as a spectator' (170). Here, then, witnessing involves watching someone watching and through this becoming

aware of our own specular habits. In this sense, Rokem's latest version of witnessing resembles one of Phelan's earliest, where she imagines witnessing as a mode of 'publicly performed spectatorship' (1999a: 119). This type of meta-spectatorship could not be more different to the type of traumatic (non-)spectatorship described by Phelan more recently.

If Malpede and Rokem triangulate the witnessing relationship spatially, then Schneider triangulates the relationship temporally. In doing so, she proposes a slightly different version of tertiary witnessing, albeit one that more closely resembles trauma studies' understanding of the term. Trauma studies tends to define the tertiary witness as the last in the 'chain of witnesses,' as seen in this passage from Stephen Smith:

If we consider the witness of the witness as the first link in the chain of witness, each 'generation' becomes less authoritative with each link in this chain. The survivor bears witness to the death of the true witness . . . The story is in turn witnessed by a third party observer. This personal testimony is then re-told or re-presented in alternative forms, such as film or literature, to be in turn re-witnessed by an audience for which personal contact with a survivor may not be possible. The chain of witnesses results in subjecting the eye-witness of the individual who was there to the opinion or re- representation of those who were not. (Smith 439; cited by Bigsby, 2006: 23)

Smith sees the repetition of testimony as a sort of degradation for both the primary witness and their testimony. However, performance studies scholars see possibilities in this scenario. For Schneider, trauma studies encourages us 'to articulate the ways in which performance, less bound to the ocular, "enters" or begins again and again, as Gertrude Stein would write, differently, via itself as repetition – like a copy or perhaps more like a ritual – as an echo in the ears of a confidante, an audience member, a witness' (2001: 106). Though she does not say it explicitly, Schneider's distinction between the audience member and the witness implies that the witness can potentially be someone who did not see the performance at all.

This mode of tertiary witnessing recalls the sort of witnessing required of the reader of *Certain Fragments*: 'Etchells asks you, dear reader, to become a witness to events that you may encounter only here in the pages of this book' (Phelan, 1999b: 12). It also recalls the phantasmic witnessing of Sarah Kane's play *Blasted*, which was, as Simon Hattenstone notes, 'performed in front of barely more than 1,000 people . . . But, like the first Sex Pistols, it has caused a strange form of false-memory syndrome. Many people believe they were there, and confidently tell the stories to prove it' (2000: 26). In both instances, we have a very literal missing of the event and a very imaginative recovery of it. Sometimes it is only retrospect, with the benefit of time and hindsight, that we can see or recognise the impact of a particular performance. In our absence, we wish that we were present and sometimes we wish with such force and such imagination that for a moment we might really believe that we were witnesses. Writing about the age of terror, Phelan argues that this 'condition of witnessing what one did

not (and perhaps cannot) see is the condition of whatever age we are now entering' (2004: 577).

Like theories of primary and secondary witnessing, theories of tertiary witnessing complicate notions of the active spectator. For spatially triangulated witnesses, witnessing is an activity that operates through identification. For temporally triangulated witnesses, witnessing is an activity that operates through imagination. This, in turn, problematises claims that witnessing is a mode of ethical spectatorship since neither identificatory nor imaginative processes are especially ethical. Elin Diamond, for instance, contends that identification is 'a fantasy assimilation not locatable in time or responsive to political ethics' (1997: 106). The tertiary witness who is temporally distanced is particularly problematic, since their imaginative, assimilative recovery of the event comes dangerously close to concepts of false witnessing. Here again, theories of witnessing would do well to (re)turn to theories of spectatorship and to (re)consider the role of ethics.

Towards a Theory of Spectatorial Witness

Even as these distinctions undo themselves, they also offer several possibilities for future directions in the discourse on spectatorial witnessing. First, these categories and subcategories of witnesses – primary, secondary, tertiary – enable scholars to speak more precisely when they refer to the spectator as a witness. Moreover, this taxonomy may prompt scholars to reconsider when and where they invoke the term witness. Occasionally, they may even decide that 'One probably cannot and should not always claim or try to witness' (Cubilié, 2005: 218). In addition, this taxonomy highlights the insufficiency of our current definition of the witness as an "active spectator" and the lack of interaction between theories of witnessing and spectatorship more generally. Looking at accounts of primary, secondary, and tertiary witnessing it becomes clear that there are many modes of activity – self-conscious seeing, unconscious seeing, listening, identifying, imagining – currently being classified under the practice of witnessing. Likewise, each of these activities is implicated in a slightly different set of ethics: primary witnessing is implicated in the ethics of vision and visibility; secondary witnessing is imbricated in the ethics of listening and repetition; tertiary witnessing is entangled in the ethics of identification and imagination. This, in turn, hints at the lack of precision in our articulation and application of the notion of ethics.

More than ethics perhaps what witnessing theory does is to (re)introduce notions of temporality into theories of spectatorship. This is particularly the case with primary witnessing. While theories of secondary witnessing are more conventional in their conception of temporality (the traumatic event precedes the theatrical event which then produces a response in the spectator), theories of primary witnessing radically disrupt our current versions of temporality in two ways. First, they introduce the notion of belatedness into spectatorship, meaning that these theories do not presume that the spectator's response is immediate and contemporaneous with the performance. To put it otherwise, perhaps we are spectators in the moment and witnesses in

and through time. This is what Phelan hints at when she writes about Marina Abramović. Watching in 2003, writing in 2004, rehearsing a theme she has been thinking about since at least 1999, re-remembering a performance she has written and spoken about before, witnessing is a durational process for Phelan. And why not? If witnessing in the theatre can be a ‘conscious, albeit belated, response to the messy truths’ of a prior event, as Phelan suggests (1999b: 13), then why would our response to the theatrical event be any faster or tidier? Why wouldn’t our response to the traumatic, testimonial, theatrical event also be belated and messy? In truth, we already know this is the case – it is why we still think and write about performances we saw years ago and it is why we feel compelled to write about some performances more than once. Perhaps it is also why we try and write about theatrical events we never saw and not only when writing theatre history. In this way, as for the (non-) spectators of *Blasted*, the event comes into being through our imaginary, indeed originary, repetition of it.

Here the radicality of the temporality of primary witnessing reveals itself further – for it is the theatrical event that becomes the original and the ‘actual’ event the repetition. In Phelan’s words:

witnessing a shooting on the street is framed by our many rehearsals of witnessing shootings in the cinema, on the television news, and indeed, in the theatre itself.

Performance employs the concept and experience of the live event as a way to rehearse our obligations to the scenes we witness in realms usually labelled the representational or the mediated. (1999b: 10)

In short, it is the theatre that precedes life. This is precisely why theories of theatrical witnessing are so fraught and so important. When we represent trauma in theatre and performance, we are rehearsing it. We are doing nothing less than attempting to rehearse the accident; we bring it on to head it off; we play at it so that when it arrives we feel prepared. Yet, of course, we are not prepared, for we cannot be prepared. Like the *fort-da* game, theatre rehearses loss and like the *fort-da* game, theatre rehearses the departure of the mother, only to miss her death.

Taxonomy, Theory, Temporality

This tipping of temporality inevitably tips this article slightly too and it becomes clear that even as the article claims to be a cartography and taxonomy, it also aims to be a prophecy of sorts – both a prediction and a provocation about where we might take witnessing theory next. Of course, theorists of primary witnessing tell us that we cannot plan to be primary witnesses, that it happens accidentally. Even when we are primary witnesses, we are not always aware of the fact.

Indeed, in primary witnessing the event is only imbued with meaning in retrospect. Nevertheless, as theorists of secondary witnessing will attest, one can intentionally become a

witness by consciously deciding to listen to another witness. Perhaps it is this mode of intense listening that ought to be our model for future discussions of witnessing.

However we proceed, it clear that witnessing cannot be distilled or contained within a taxonomy such as this. Even so, perhaps these distinctions will remind us about what is at stake when we call the spectator a witness. The accident cannot be created or rehearsed, it cannot be planned, it cannot be predicted, and it cannot be repeated – that is what makes it an accident. Yet performance can be created and rehearsed, it can be planned, it can be predicted and it can (at least to some extent) be repeated – this is what makes it a performance. It is the impossible paradox of the “rehearsed accident” that makes witnessing in the theatre so impossible and ridiculous, so important and miraculous.

Endnotes

[1] For accounts of the writer as witness see for instance Karen Malpede (1996a; 1996b) and Diana Taylor (1997; 2003). For accounts of the actor or performer as witness see for instance Tim Etchells (1999), Malpede (1996a, 1996b), Melissa Salz (1996), Karine Schaefer (2003a; 2003b), and Freddie Rokem (2000; 2002), and Belarie Zatzman (2003). For accounts of the character as witness see for example Malpede (1996b), Rokem (2002), Salz (1996), and Schaefer (2003b; 2003c). This entire article examines accounts of the spectator as witness, specifically those of Etchells (1999), Rokem (2000; 2002), Phelan (1999a; 1999b; 2004), Taylor (1997; 2003), and Govan (2005). In addition, please see the work of Ann Cooper Albright (1997), Vivian Patraka (1999), and Schaefer (2003b). The dramaturg is the newest addition to this list, first appearing in Richard Hancock’s posting to the SCUDD list on 6 October 2008. The email invited people to ‘The Witness as Dramaturg’ symposium. I have yet to see any scholarly work on the dramaturg as witness.

[2] For instance, Diana Taylor argues that ‘the theatre, like the testimony, like the photograph, film, or report, can make witnesses of others’ (2003: 211). Similarly, Freddie Rokem states that ‘the theatrical medium has an inherent tendency to create situations where some kind of witness is present. I would even claim that all theater performances contain some form of direct or implicit witnessing, or transformations of witnessing’ (2002: 180). More radically, Karen Malpede argues that the ‘theatre of witness increases the individual’s and the society’s capacity to bear witness’ (1996: 277).

[3] For Phelan on Caruth see *Mourning Sex* (1997: 22, 96). For Malpede on Felman and Laub see the articles ‘Teaching Witnessing’ (1996a: 177) and ‘Theatre of Witness’ (1996b: 269). For Taylor on Felman and Laub see *Disappearing Acts* (1997: 27, 213) and *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003: 205, 210).

[4] Conversely, I would argue that the time is also ripe for a turn away from trauma studies towards media studies, film studies, and legal studies, among other disciplines. This lies outside the scope of this article but it seems necessary to engage broadly as well as deeply with other disciplines in order to continue to shape and sharpen our own language of witnessing.

[5] For instance, Taylor repeatedly refers to the ‘active spectator or witness’ (2003: xi, 27, 261), as does Rokem who argues that witnessing ‘transforms the passive theatre-goer into an active spectator’ (2002:

171). Similarly, Vivian Patraka states that ‘witnessing is an active process of spectatorship rather than a passive consumption of a pre-narrated spectacle’ (1999: 124) and Emma Govan describes witnessing as ‘an active mode of readership’ which suggests a ‘different level of [audience] engagement’ (2005: 52). I am not exempt from this criticism, having used this habitual formulation in previously published work, where I argued that the spectator ‘is transformed from a passive watcher into an active witness’ (2008: 1998).

[6] For example, Etchells states that ‘to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way’ (1999: 17). Similarly, Taylor describes the witness as a ‘responsible, ethical, participant rather than spectator to crisis’ (2003: 243). Rokem goes so far as to say that the meta-theoretical function of witnessing theory is to ‘introduc[e] a moral as well as an ideological perspective into the seemingly neutral arena of the theory of signs’ (2002: 167).

[7] I am thinking here of a play such as Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis* or a performance such as Mike Parr’s *Punch Holes in the Body Politic*. On the former, see Alicia Tycer’s article (2008); on the latter, see Jacqueline Milner (2005) and Ed Scheer (2008).

[8] Here my thinking about the ethical ambiguity of the traumatic event has been influenced by Helena Grehan’s thinking about ambivalence (2008). It is also, in a sense, a rewriting of Claire Bishop’s argument in her article ‘Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics’ (2004) through the lens of trauma studies. In this article Bishop argues that it is precisely the ethically ambiguous, even ethically dubious, work of artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra that provokes the audience into thinking ethically and further, into thinking about the category of the “ethical” itself.

[9] This is not to say that there isn’t the occasional argument over who can and cannot be called a secondary witness. Some scholars, such as Dora Apel, define the secondary witness in general terms as someone who ‘cannot recall events themselves, [only] recall their relationship to the memory of the events’ (Apel 2002: 21). However, other scholars find this definition is too broad. For instance, LaCapra argues that ‘the academic (as academic) is not – and is not entitled simply to identify with – a therapist working in intimate contact with survivors or other traumatized people. Reading texts, working on archival material, or viewing videos is not tantamount to such contact’ (2001: 98). If LaCapra is anxious about the spatiotemporal limits of the term, then Geoffrey Hartman is concerned with its generational limits, i.e. about the move from the ‘second-generation’ to the ‘secondary’ witness more generally (1998: 37-8). Nevertheless, both men have attempted to make room for other types of secondary witnesses. Hartman has elaborated a theory of ‘intellectual witness’ (1998) and LaCapra has developed a distinction between experience and event in order to argue that secondary witnesses can have a traumatic *experience* without having been present at the traumatic *event* (2004: 112-43, especially 125). (This has implications that cannot be taken up here but need to be examined, especially in view of performance studies’ increasing fascination with the event and event theory.)

[10] Of course, there is an important sense in which even the primary witness is a false witness, as both Primo Levi and Giorgio Agamben have pointed out. Levi writes ‘we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. . . . We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They

are the rule, we are the exception. . . . We speak in their stead, by proxy' (1989: 83-4). Likewise, Agamben – who draws heavily on Levi – argues that 'the witness, the ethical subject, is the subject who bears witness to desubjectification' (2002: 151). Since it is impossible to testify to one's own desubjectification, even the primary witness is necessarily false.

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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:

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