

‘Did you mean *post-traumatic theatre*?’: The vicissitudes of traumatic memory in contemporary postdramatic performances

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While working on the English translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s *Postdramatisches Theater* a few years ago, I had a strange experience: When conducting a Google search for ‘postdramatic theatre’, Google asked: ‘Did you mean “*post-traumatic theatre*”?’ Nowadays, Google no longer asks this question. For by now the concept of ‘postdramatic theatre’ – describing forms of contemporary theatre without the mimesis of a dramatic plot, fictional universe and conflict between psychological characters – has arrived in its dictionary. And yet, might there not be some truth to Google’s erstwhile ‘Freudian slip’? Does there not seem to be a relation between the postdramatic and the *post-traumatic* at least in a considerable portion of twentieth and twenty-first century contemporary theatre? [1] And could it not be that there is an affinity between trauma’s incommensurability, inaccessibility and ultimate resistance to narrative representation and postdramatic theatre’s anti-representational impetus, combined with its preference for fragmentation and its emphasis on the live copresence of audience members and performers? What I am proposing to explore in this article by analysing a few recent examples is how postdramatic forms of theatre might relate to forms of traumatic memory in the twenty-first century.

Trauma describes phenomena of intense psychic disturbance that have been variously theorised and defined by Freud, Breuer and others since the onset of industrial modernity, first in the context of responses to train crashes and female hysteria brought on by abuse, later in the context of war neuroses brought on by the experience of the First World War and most importantly in the context of the Holocaust. More recently in the 1980s, in the context of the aftermath of the Vietnam War and as an official acknowledgement of the lasting impact of traumatic experiences on the individual, American clinical psychologists combined many of Freud’s insights with clinical

observations into the diagnosable disorder of 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (PTSD). As Cathy Caruth sums up, trauma is

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the forms of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from this event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (Caruth, 1995b: 4)

Following Freud and Lacan, Caruth argues that the pathology of trauma cannot be defined by the event itself, which 'may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally'; rather it consists

solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. (Caruth, 1995b: 4)

This is what causes trauma's resistance to narrative representation: 'Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become . . . a 'narrative memory' that is integrated into a completed story of the past' (Caruth, 1995a: 153). For Caruth this has implications that go 'beyond the pathology of individual suffering' (i.e. PTSD), involving 'a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms' (1995a: 156). This marks the critical shift to a consideration of traumatic memory as a potentially trans-individual and collective phenomenon, albeit one, as I will argue below, that is mediated and increasingly mediatised.

While Caruth and other post-Freudian, poststructuralist trauma theorists have been criticised for overemphasising the phenomenon of dissociation and the 'unrepresentability' and 'inaccessibility' of trauma compared to possibilities of a narrative 'working through', [2] scholars in literature, film and theatre have taken recourse to their theories for explaining why postmodern artists have responded to traumatic histories by

eschewing narrative representation. Thus Jeanette Malkin argues in her book *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* that

narrative forms of memory are integrative by nature; they tend to 'restore or establish coherence, closure, and a redemptive state,' writes Saul Friedlander, thereby side-stepping the more profound mires of memory. The real memory of trauma, so-called deep memory, is, however, resistant to such rational order and unaffected by it. Unmediated and inexpressible, trauma remains unrepresented by narrative constructions. (Malkin, 1999: 31-32)

Published the same year as Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999), Malkin's book arrives at many insights that are highly relevant in our context, but it does not distinguish between drama and theatre. These, as Lehmann argues, used to be closely entwined in Western European theatre but have increasingly drifted apart in the course of the twentieth century, as contemporary experience has increasingly exceeded the ordering mechanisms of drama. Malkin stops short of questioning whether the terms 'drama' and 'dramatic', with their implication of a teleological narrative and closed-off fictional universe, are still apposite descriptions for the works she describes. Most of these works (by Beckett, Heiner Müller and others), I would suggest, are in fact 'no longer dramatic' texts and likely to result in postdramatic stagings. Furthermore, her focus on '*textually* based dramaturgies', as Malkin herself is aware, leads her 'to exclude other forms of memoried theatre' (218), such as Robert Wilson theatre, Pina Bausch's dance theatre or Tadeusz Kantor's theatre. From the point of view of theatrical *performance*, both text-based and non-text based/devised forms of 'memoried theatres' could, however, be studied productively as forms of 'postdramatic theatre'.

Apart from a new emphasis on the performance situation in European and North American theatre and art from the 1960s onwards, another crucial context for the development of contemporary postdramatic theatre, is the 'caesura of the media society'. Its impact does not necessarily manifest itself in high tech 'multi-media' theatre 'but sometimes also in its very opposite: a minimalist, pared down aesthetics, which

nevertheless can only be understood by being related to life in a “mediatised” society’ (Jürs-Munby, 2006: 10). This context of a mass media society also complicates the question of traumatic memory, as ‘most people encounter trauma through the media, which is why focusing on so-called mediatized trauma is important’ (Kaplan, 2005: 2). One aspect that is therefore interesting to explore is how postdramatic forms of theatre respond to such mediatised trauma. How do artists account for a world in which most of the traumatic events we ‘witness’ are ones we have not seen in person?

In what follows I will trace some of the multifarious relationships between postdramatic forms of theatre and the subject of traumatic memory in three very different recent productions. For, just as the term postdramatic theatre covers a wide variety of heterogeneous forms, as will become clear, there is no one way in which the postdramatic relates to the post-traumatic. My discussion is thus an attempt to begin to map a continuum of the many ways in which postdramatic performances may engage with the nature of traumatic memory.

At the time of my above mentioned conversation with Google’s unconscious, I had just seen Goat Island’s piece *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy* (2005). The work uses fragmented and repetitive postdramatic structures to communicate something of the nature of trauma and traumatic memory; it references the reverberating damage caused by historical trauma obliquely but powerfully. My reading of this performance, drawing on Lacan and Žižek, seeks to identify how the ‘real’ of trauma is intimated here and how it is formally negotiated.

In October 2007, I saw *After Dubrovka*, an installation performance for theatre buildings by Neil Mackenzie and Mole Wetherell that responded more directly to one recent traumatic event, the siege and consequent carnage in a Moscow theatre in 2002. Here, too, there was an inbuilt repetition, in this case affecting the way in which the performance attempted to repeat/re-member a prior event through the spectator’s embodiment of absent people’s positions within an empty theatre. My discussion revolves around my disquiet at the time with the way in which the performance, as an

act of remembrance, contained a 'blindspot' that could lead to a 'mis-remembering' – but which on reflection marked its very traumatic kernel.

This leads me to consider the ways in which trauma is referenced and mediated in/by contemporary theatre and the ways in which it addresses the increasing experience of *mediatised* trauma in contemporary life. An analysis of Forced Entertainment's recent performance *Void Story* (2009), which addresses this mediatisation more directly, will serve as an outlook in this respect. As in the other performances discussed, there is an avoidance of dramatic representation of traumatic events, which are recited rather than enacted but at the same time, and unlike in the other two cases, there is a more direct acknowledgement of mediatisation and an attempt to remediatised the effects of television, internet and film on stage.

What I am *not* going to suggest here is that postdramatic theatre is somehow privileged in remembering, witnessing or '*performing history*' compared to forms of dramatic theatre (or indeed other genres and media). [3] While witnessing in the sense of a heightened and self-reflective attentiveness is cultivated by the performances I shall discuss, this does not mean they are in any way superior in communicating the traumatic histories they allude to. On the contrary, as will become clear, their eschewal and problematisation of representation in some cases also harbours the danger of being non-specific to the point of historical 'forgetting' or distortion, erasing the specificity or distinctiveness of the traumatic event(s) that are referenced. In this, however, they bear witness not only to the temporality of traumatic memory but also to the imbrications of memory, fantasy and forgetting in the age of mass media.

'There's a hole in this performance': The Traumatic Real in *When will the September roses bloom?*

Goat Island's two-year devising process had begun with the question 'How do you repair?'. In its heavily layered movement work, poetic structure and spoken text it was informed by many disparate sources: old repair manuals; the poetry of Paul Celan,

whose project was the “repair” of the German language in post World War II Europe’ after it had been corrupted by the Nazis; W.G. Sebald’s account of Jean Améry’s torture in prison by the SS, Simone Weil’s *Gravity and Grace*, and the silent film *The Wind* starring Lillian Gish as the fragile heroine, to name but a few (Goulish, 2004). Goat Island’s choice of props makes this concern with repair physically tangible: crutches made of wood and cardboard pieces that have to be carefully reassembled by one performer to prop up another, one-legged wooden stools on which the performers balance precariously, tables of cardboard that could collapse at any moment. The materials, deliberately chosen for their lightness, as Mark Jeffery explains the process, ‘have engaged and absorbed themselves into the piece: ideas of repair, collapse, fragility, falling, uncertainty, failed magic shows and tricks, comedy compared to darkness, perversity and interrogations – have responded in how we work with the materials of lightness’ (Jeffery, 2004).

The performance self-consciously announces its postdramatic lack of dramatic wholeness at several points that interrupt the flow of the performance: early on in the evening one of the performers, Bryan, enters to address the audience, first on one side, then on the other of the traverse seating arrangement. He stutters and stumbles over the words, has to reposition himself and start over again. In this tentative, faltering manner he apologises to us that the company ‘had lost . . . umh . . . [was] . . . missing the beginning’. Somewhere near the middle of the performance, Litó, another performer, suddenly explains that ‘there’s a hole in the performance’ and that the performers will escape through it – after which all performers disappear behind a large cardboard disk that has a small hole in the middle – only to reappear as surreal disembodied heads in a black and white film projected onto the disk. Somewhere towards the end Bryan explains that they do not yet have an ending. In his speech (borrowed from Lillian Gish’s opening monologue in *The Wind*) he dryly explains that they’d been asked by the ‘exhibitors’ to ‘tack on a happy ending’ but that ‘it’s not finished, that other ending, the happy one. We are still working on it. As soon as the happy ending is ready, we will let you know. Check our website.’ And even though Mark later announces that the company had now ‘found’ the missing beginning, this overt attempt at a ‘repair’ of the

structure in the form of a repeated director's pep talk (borrowed from the musical *42nd Street*) only produces more gaps and missing bits with every repetition.

In this way, the performance not only refers to the work as an ongoing, unfinished process but signals its inability or unwillingness to live up to common expectations towards theatre as drama, such as the Aristotelian definition of tragedy as 'an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; . . . A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end' (Aristotle, 1996: 13). Instead of forming a dramatic fictional *whole*, the complex postdramatic structure of *When will the September roses bloom?* is full of *holes*. Furthermore, holes and gaps are apparent not only in its missing beginning, middle and end but proliferate in the structure of individual sections, for instance through the structure of the Fibonacci sequence (2,3,5,8,13,21,43,55, etc) that times the choreography. And finally there are holes and gaps in the text itself or its delivery by the performers in the form of stuttering, skipping and omitting or partially mumbled and mangled speech, as well as awkward silences.

How do these holes and voids relate to the work's thematic concerns with trauma and repair? I shall propose that the spectator's unexpected encounter with the Real, which Lacan calls 'tuché' and which he says is essentially a missed encounter (Lacan, 1981: 55) occurs precisely through the holes, fissures, ruptures, voids and imperfections of the performance. This can initially be articulated through a comparison with the structural perfection of drama in order to trace how the Real – a dimension that is by definition excluded from the philosophical ideal of drama, (though never quite from any performance of drama!) – can be experienced in this postdramatic performance. [4] In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann repeatedly calls attention to Aristotle's curious comparison of a dramatic plot structure with an *animal* to illustrate the need for correct 'magnitude' and surveyability. [5] Lehmann identifies surveyability and the spectators' resulting sense of mastery over the 'animal' of the dramatic structure – and by extension over the world as a key feature of drama (2006: 40-41). By contrast, if Goat Island's performance piece were an animal, it would be both too small and too large to be 'taken in' by the spectator. Too small because nothing much happens –

there is no dramatic action, only acts, often small, delicate acts, movements and monologues – and too large because Goat Island’s mimicking, doubling and intertextual citing of texts, images and film texts opens out – like ‘wormholes’, so to speak – into so many other worlds, genres, media and perspectives that the performance as whole becomes entirely unsurveyable. Visually and spatially, the traverse seating arrangement heightens the impossibility of totalising the performance, as Bryan demonstrates through a little lecture in which he calls our attention to the fact that what is ‘clockwise’ for half of us is ‘counter-clockwise’ for the other half. The contingency of our position in space affords us only ever a partial view.

On a temporal scale *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy* further heightens this unsurveyability by the fact that there is a second version of the performance the following night, which the audience are invited to attend (though not all do). Through the repetition of this second night, there is now a greater sense that this is about *memory*. It mimics the repetitive structure of memory itself and involves me as the spectator in the belatedness (Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*) of sudden insight. I’m not sure whether it is due to the time that has intervened since last night (a time in which I’ve also read the programme notes and followed up some of the references), the subtle differences in the performers’ repetitions, a greater intensity in Matthew Goulish’s disturbing contorted movements when performing the torture victim’s mangled monologue or the reversed order of the middle parts that allows me suddenly to realise – only now, not until this second night! – that trauma is at the very heart of this piece and its ‘impaired’ structure.



Figure 1. Litó Walkey, Karen Christopher and Matthew Goulish in Goat Island's *When will the September roses bloom? Last night was only a comedy*.

It was trauma that first led psychoanalysis to theorise the Real, which Lacan importantly distinguishes from reality. *Reality*, in as much as it is symbolically constructed and constituted, as Slavoj Žižek argues, actually has the form of a *fiction* (Žižek, 1992: 50-54). The Lacanian Real, on the other hand, is that which escapes and resists symbolisation, it cannot be named or represented but rather can be perceived only because it 'produce[s] a series of effects in the symbolic reality of the subjects', as Žižek says elsewhere (1989: 163). 'The Real is in itself', he writes, 'a hole, a gap, an opening in the middle of the symbolic order – it is the lack around which the symbolic order is structured' (1989: 170). Goat Island's work, I suggest, can in many ways be read as an attempt to write or perform the Real. As Žižek states,

The Real is of course, in a first approach, that which cannot be inscribed, which 'doesn't cease not to inscribe itself [ne cesse pas de ne pas s'écrire]' – the rock upon which every formalization stumbles. But it is precisely through this failure that we can in a way encircle, locate the empty place of the Real. In other words, the Real cannot be inscribed, but we can inscribe this impossibility itself, we can locate its place: a traumatic place which causes a series of failures. (Žižek, 1989: 172-73)

In *When will the September...* such an encircling of the real is not only achieved through missing scenes and structural holes, however, but also through the articulation of a series of unbridgeable gaps. There is the inevitable gap in translation from one language to another – the “untranslatability” Benjamin writes about – demonstrated through the juxtaposition of Paul Celan’s poem in German (“Wann, / wann blühen, wann / wann blühen ... ja sie, die September- / rosen?”), followed by the quirky differently syncopated English translation (When do they flower, when / yes they, the Septembers / the Seven ambers / Roses, when when). Then there is the gap in our visual perception caused by the blindspot, the hole in the sheet of photoreceptors in the back of our eye, which Goat Island demonstrate with another lecture performance in which they ask us to cover one eye and discover our blind spot (the split between the image and the gaze, between perception and consciousness is of course one of the instances of the Real for Lacan). Then, and perhaps related to this, there is also the gap between live performance and mediated performance – the performers’ escape through the hole of the cardboard disc and their reappearance as disembodied heads on a silent movie screen seems to indicate that the price to be paid for mechanical reproduction is the loss of corporeality. Furthermore, there is the ‘caesura between human and animal’, which Giorgio Agamben writes about (Agamben 2004: 16, as cited by Goulish 2004). By performing dog movements but never ‘becoming’ dogs, Goat Island make this unbridgeable divide painfully real.

Most importantly for our context there is the gap opened up between the performer and the figure they take on, the gap of repetition in performance. As Heike Roms has observed in her response to the performance, Goat Island here highlight the “doubleness” that is fundamental to theatre, making it speak to the way in which traumatic memory is recalled:

This performance is like the double of the double, repetition of repetition. Karen is introduced as ‘Simone Weil as Lillian Gish in the Wind’. Matthew stands in for W.G. Sebald standing in for Jean Améry, speaking the words of the German

author as he recalls the torture experienced and recounted by the Jewish philosopher. Experience and the memory of it is not represented but recalled repeatedly like a series of echoes through time. (Roms, 2005)

Roms later makes the point – by way of Søren Kierkegaard and Samuel Weber – that this recalling of repetition is different from recollection. Whereas recollection is repeated backwards and thus induces sadness about loss, repetition ‘in the sense of “taking again”, creates happiness as it suggests the possibility of recovering what has been lost’ (Roms, 2005). Kierkegaard, she states, ‘searches for this promise in the double time of the theatre, yet soon realises its impossibility. Goat Island explores this impossibility by performing the movement backwards and forward between the sadness of recollection and the happiness of retaking’ (Roms, 2005). This for me also articulates what Žižek means by ‘inscribing the impossibility’ of the traumatic Real itself.

Žižek makes another pertinent point about the real in relation to writing. Even though ‘the Real cannot be inscribed, . . . at the same time, the Real *is* the writing itself as opposed to the signifier’ (Žižek 1989: 171). If we substitute ‘performing’ for writing, this articulates the way in which Goat Island communicates the Real – not so much through ‘signifiers’ (meaning) but through the quality and attentiveness of the performing itself. The fact that Goat Island are also at various points highlighting the artificial construction of their piece does not diminish this sense. Neither the repetition of the second night, nor the last scene of Litó Walkey’s slow show dance to a distorted version of the ‘The Great Pretender’ – both of which overtly point to the fact that the company was only “pretending” to have holes and missing scenes in the performance – lessen the communication of the Real through the performing itself. On the contrary, they can draw us in further.

One scene that stands out in this respect is the long silence in which the performer Litó carefully balances on one leg. Sara Jane Bailes has described her experience of watching Litó doing this in rehearsal:

her thigh strong, straight, and parallel to the ground, her knee suspended calculating tension, calf perpendicular, the straightness of the posture a lie to the defiance of gravity this position demanded of her physical body, her foot hovering, then quivering inches above the ground enduring the immensity of seven minutes of carefully counted time. (Bailes, 2004)

She writes that watching Litó ‘accumulated a peculiar sadness in [her] every time [she] witnessed it’ until finally she allowed herself to cry. Wondering whether sadness is the impulse to repair, she began to realise, she writes, ‘that it is not the task itself, but the attention each performer brings to the execution of the task that provokes my response.’

This response is different in kind to the cathartic purging of emotion that dramatic tragedy aims for, which is specific to the story told and manipulated by the evocation of pity and fear in the course of the drama. It is also different in kind to responses evoked by particular first hand testimonies. As Adrian Heathfield puts it in the context of Goat Island’s previous performance, *It’s an Earthquake in My Heart* (2001),

one can think of Goat Island’s work as a kind of physical testimony, but one that side-steps and comments on the foundations and pitfalls of contemporary testimonial culture; the belief that we can return through a cathartic telling to an authoritative version of a traumatic event, the belief that in this telling we might arrive at an essential or truthful version of ourselves. . . . In Goat Island’s work this final truth remains forever inaccessible. This is the hole that takes the name of ‘earthquake’ in *It’s an Earthquake in My Heart*. . . . Earthquake is a good name, but the hole itself remains unspeakable. Their silence enables you to bring an idea to fill their hole. Perhaps your hole is an actual earthquake, or a forgotten event, a lost love, or a car crash; you can rest assured it is welcomed here. (Heathfield, 2001; also in Bottoms and Goulis, 2007: 101)

As Heathfield’s observations highlight, open and fragmentary performances such as Goat Island’s may evoke personal and collective traumatic memories different to those

originally sourced by the performers in the devising process. These responses are also highly dependent on the context in which the performance is received. For example, *It's an Earthquake in My Heart* was completed before the events of September 11th 2001 (as was Heathfield's above response to it) but when it toured after 9/11 the imagery in the performance was perceived as intensely resonant in relation to these events. This was also true for *When will the September...*, which was devised in the aftermath of 9/11 but contained no direct reference to it. As with *It's an Earthquake...*, the layering of traumatic images or situations of 'damage' and impairment that this piece obliquely encircles leads not so much to a decoded political 'message' but to a more diffuse responsiveness to individual and collective traumatisation. This could be seen as part of what Lehmann has described as a 'politics of perception', which he regards as the most viable politics of theatre in a world dominated by media communication in which there is 'no relation between addressee and answer' anymore (Lehmann, 2006: 185). The company's reflections on their own work at the time (Bottoms, 2004) certainly indicate that faced with the seemingly 'irreparable' damage being done by the Bush government they had an unspoken desire to effect a cultural shift through what Lehmann would call an 'aesthetics of responsibility', which he terms *Ver-antwortung* or 'response-ability' (185).

'This is theatre and it is not theatre': The Traumatic Blindspot of *After Dubrovka*

Unlike *When will the September roses bloom*, Neil Mackenzie's and Mole Wetherell's *After Dubrovka*, an installation work for theatre buildings (realised with sound artist Spencer Marsden), was more narrowly focused on a singular specific traumatic event. It was scheduled to coincide with the five year anniversary of the Moscow Theatre siege and was clearly framed as 'post-traumatic' by the pre-performance publicity:

In October 2002, Chechen rebels took over the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow during a performance of the musical *Nord-Ost*, taking audience and performers hostage. The siege lasted for nearly two and a half days, ending when the Russian

military pumped in a sedative gas and stormed the building. 129 hostages died.
(Nuffield Theatre)

And as soon as the usher urgently tells us of the events in Moscow, shortly before herding us through the backstage onto the stage of the old Grand Theatre in Lancaster, anything we see and hear from now on will be framed and coloured by this information. When we step out onto the raked stage the few people dotted about the auditorium appear like ghosts – in fact I wonder at first whether they are only wax models (or mannequins as in Kantor's theatre); more than anything they highlight the fact that all the other seats are empty.

Although one could also discuss this performance under the heading of 'sound installations' or 'site specific theatre', I will here be reading it as a piece of postdramatic theatre. There is certainly no dramatically represented story or plot, no dialogue, no visible characters, nor even any live performers – until we come to realise that we are the performers here. The usher motions to us to stand under various loudspeakers suspended above the stage from where an intimate voice addresses us. The style of the spoken text, the direct address to the audience, the meditative 'you', immediately reminds me of Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience* (1966). But Handke's 'speakers' in this piece have become invisible speakers on loudspeakers. His reversal of theatre's conventional gaze, redirecting it to look at the audience as the subject and protagonist, is literally enacted by positioning us first on the stage and later – still under a spotlight – in the auditorium looking back at other members of the audience in the position of 'actors'.

'This is theatre and it is not theatre. It is an event in a theatre, remembering an event in another theatre – an act of remembrance', the advertising blurb had stated, preparing us for the ontological, temporal and spatial/geographical confusion we are about to enter. Our own presence on stage seems ghosted by actors who once stood here, or those who can be imagined to have stood in the metaphorical 'here', for we are after all in a theatre in Lancaster or Manchester, not in Moscow. 'You are here instead of me,'

the overhead voice whispers, ‘instead of all the others who have been here, who’ve stood on a stage like this, it’s a lot of parts to play, a lot of roles to take on, perhaps you’re going to play an actor, or a singer, or a national leader, or a terrorist’. My standing in for all these absent people – the actors, terrorists, and later audience members – is an uncanny and impossible sort of re-presentation and identification. How can I be both innocent victim and terrorist at the same time? How can I be alive and yet dead? For now, I might just choose the last option the whispering voice gives me: ‘Or you might be just you. On this stage. In this theatre’.



Figure 2. *After Dubrovka* at the Manchester Dance House.

This kind of continual slippage and confusion is central to the piece: am I asked to think of a literal stage (the stage of *The Grand* in Lancaster or the Dancehouse in Manchester – the two places where *After Dubrovka* was performed), the imagined stage in Moscow, a fictional stage, or even the *teatrum mundi* of the “world stage”? Am I standing in for a theatrical performer or for someone about to perform a terrorist act? There would seem be a profound difference in ‘performativity’, of course. [6] But then the confusion between theatrical performance and terrorist performatives is the sort of confusion the audience and the Chechen gunmen themselves might have been aware of when they entered the Dubrovka theatre that night through the scene of a musical (*Nord-Ost*,

which ironically featured Russian soldiers with weapons). As the speaker whispers to me:

This is not your space
You should not be here
They should not be looking at people like you
They were not expecting to see people like you
You are not welcome here. This is a theatre.
You are where the entertainment should be.
You are where the performers should be performing.
You are standing where there should be a show, a play, a musical. . .
This is a place for pretence and illusion.
This is a place where the stories are make-believe.
Where real things don't happen.
Where the story ends, the music finishes, and the audience gets up and leaves.

This ontological 'trespassing' of theatre by 'real things' was certainly at the heart of the trauma in the Moscow Theatre Siege. It is a violation this performance intimates without enacting it in front of us.

The arguments over whether horrendous traumas could and should ever be represented in literature or the theatre have been well rehearsed over the years and have mainly revolved around the representation of the Holocaust. In fact Handke's *Offending the Audience*, which 'shadows' *After Dubrovka*, was indirectly motivated by this debate. At the time, a 'new realism' was the dominant form of the day in postwar West German literature and theatre. Shortly before the premiere of *Offending the Audience*, the young Handke had scandalously accused the assembled establishment of Germany's postwar writers, the *Gruppe 47* of '*Beschreibungsimpotenz*' (Handke, 1972: 29), the impotency to describe, and of an unreflected use of language as a window to real life. [7] Handke's *Offending the Audience* refuses to describe and represent anything for the spectators: 'This is no documentary play. This is no slice of

life. We don't tell you a story' (Handke, 1997: 8). Instead it sets out to conduct an 'argument with the theatre', making the audience aware of their own expectations towards it.

Using strategies informed by Handke and his seminal critique of representational theatre, *After Dubrovka*, too, has us reflect on our expectations in relation to the representation of traumatic events. Once in the auditorium, the loudspeaker built into the front of my seat tells me that I will be deprived of the sensationalist dramatic spectacle I may have expected, that this is 'not CNN':

The stage isn't full of soldiers wearing masks holding real guns filled with real ammunition.

There's no one on the edge of the row that you are sitting on holding a trigger to a switch to a homemade device.

There's not even going to be an explosion .

There's not even going to be a stage fight.

A reconstruction of the events that took place.

A room filled with gas.

A room filled with sleep.

The text goes on to alternately invite us to contemplate the people who are now on stage (the next group of audience members who have taken our place) and to put ourselves in the position of the hostages in the Moscow auditorium. Here, too, there is repetition but rather than the repetition of an entire performance, reminiscent of the structure of compulsive repetition associated with trauma, this is a repetition of a prior event, five years later, in another place, another country that had only witnessed the original event on television. Repetition is also built into the very 'machine' of the installation: audience members becoming 'actors' and then 'audience members' for new audience members who they in turn watch as 'actors' trying to imagine what it was like to be there. It is a kind of *fort-da* game of absence and presence that could be repeated ad infinitum and in which we are left looking at each other and ourselves as ghostly

revenants. (One of my fellow audience members in Lancaster reported that on his way out an usher – probably carried away rather than instructed – had said to him: ‘You are dead!’).

So in many ways, *After Dubrovka* is a postdramatic posttraumatic experience, which like Goat Island’s performance has the potential to engage us in a ‘politics of perception’ to counter the anaesthesia produced by media news coverage. But afterwards I had a nagging unease about the performance as ‘an act of remembrance’. In an after show discussion I questioned whether this kind of piece could ‘live up to’, ‘testify to’ or even ‘make us aware of’ the horrendous events in the Dubrovka theatre in 2002 or whether it would remain a mere exercise in theatre navel-gazing about its own apparatus. This may seem unfair and contradictory: why accuse a deliberately non-representational theatre installation of an inadequate ‘account’ of the events? But one of the problems, I thought, was that we may have little historical memory or knowledge about the Dubrovka event with which to ‘fill the gaps’ that we were invited to fill imaginatively in this performance installation. We tend to know about events like these precisely only through CNN and other global news media coverage. Was there not a possibility that this performance would result in a ‘mis-remembrance’ of Dubrovka?

In the aftermath of the performance my disquiet sent me to the library and the internet in search of more information about the Moscow Theatre Siege. The problem for the theatre makers and audience members alike is that so little is still known about what really happened: the adroit cover-up by the Russian government can make us in Western Europe ‘forget’ that most of the casualties in the theatre (well over 200 by some sources) died as a result of the gas pumped into the auditorium by their own government – their cause of death simply registered as ‘terrorism’. [8] There is little hint in the performance text of *After Dubrovka* that the main perpetrators in this case may have been Russian government officials savagely sacrificing the hostages to further their own aims. [9]

Trying to analyse in retrospect where this ‘forgetting’ or repression that I perceived occurred in the performance, I arrived at the conclusion that it had to do with the installation’s spatial opposition of stage and auditorium, terrorists/actors and hostages/audience. Our imaginary identifications revolved around this divide because that was the way we physically ‘plotted’ our way through the performance. The *third* party involved in the original event, the Russian military, could go under the radar in this set-up because it was positioned in the blindspot of the performance, like the gas that killed so many in the Dubrovka Theatre it was the invisible. In a much belated response, brought out by analysis, I now realised that for me this structural, spatial blindspot marks the real traumatic kernel of *After Dubrovka* – and one that was essential to the experience.

What seems to be at issue here, too, is a difference between representation and referentiality. An absence of visually staged or dramatically enacted representation does not mean an absence of reference to history or the world outside the theatre. Open forms of postdramatic performances like the ones I have discussed so far rely on spectators making their own connections, bringing their own images and knowledge to the performance – more so than this is usually the case in *any* performance. The question of referentiality has also been raised as a problem in relation to Goat Island’s performance. Thus Ric Allsopp responded to the show by asking

how can the spectator . . . participate in the range of reference that the process of ‘revealing’ the performance implies – ‘we have discovered a performance by making it’? This casts the audience as active reader/producer of the performance – yet the form resists or denies us the possibility of such a position, cutting out the references from which the work begins to take its shape. The spectator as labourer, as reader/writer, as co-author, has little with which to engage or focus her labour or participation. (Allsopp, 2005).

In defence of Goat Island – as well as the makers of *After Dubrovka* – I would argue that the problem with referentiality here is to some extent tied up with the way in which

they try to find an aesthetics that can intimate the inaccessibility of trauma. It is related to what Caruth says about referentiality in relation to a history of trauma:

For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence. (Caruth, 1995b: 8)

Furthermore – and here I disagree with Allsopp who seems to demand that the performance must reveal all its references during the time frame of the live performance itself – both *Goat Island* and the makers of *After Dubrovka* rely on an after-effect that is tied up with the latency of trauma itself. Both performances involve audience members in a certain amount of ‘homework’ to extract (or belatedly attach!) cultural or historical references. Although arguably this reliance on the spectator’s ongoing processing is more risky when the performance aims to engage audiences in the historical ‘remembrance’ of a single historical event whose official memory, moreover, has been deliberately obscured, than when it is engaged in charting the effects of traumatic damage in a more layered and indeterminate way, as in the *Goat Island* performance.

Mediated Traumas and the Trauma of Mediatisation: Forced Entertainment’s *Void Story*

My final example is again very different from either of the performances discussed so far. I wanted to include it for consideration because for me it deals with a phenomenon that merely surfaced in the other two performances, namely that of mediatised trauma. The set up of *Void Story* is at first reminiscent of their previous work *Exquisite Pain*, another ‘post-traumatic’ piece, based on Sophie Calle’s art installation by the same name, which charts how a woman deals with the pain of a traumatic break-up by contrasting her own ‘worst memory’ with that of other people. [10] Here, too, the performers sit at desks reading scripts and speaking into microphones while their dialogue is illustrated by large images projected onto a screen behind them. These black and white images on a huge screen could be seen to function like traumatic

flashbacks. They each show the beleaguered pair of protagonists, Kim and Jackson (whose faces are not identical with any of the four live performers), as cut and paste collage figures in crudely collaged landscapes and nightmarish situations. Furthermore, the performers make or manipulate the sound effects – often unbearably loud – and perform the voices of other characters the protagonists encounter, thus creating the overall impression of the live making of a radio show.

Void Story may stretch the definition of postdramatic theatre, as it does actually contain a narrative and dialogue of sorts – a new departure for Forced Entertainment. But the story is recited rather than enacted by the performers and, moreover, does not add up to a dramatically structured plot. Instead it accumulates disasters as the ‘protagonists’ are on the run from one horrendous situation after another. They talk about getting shot, evicted, frightened by an explosion, chased down a tunnel, forced to swim through a sewer, bitten by giant insects, conscripted by armsdealers, locked in refrigerated trucks, and so on. It all ends as suddenly as it had begun, on a cliff-hanger rather than a resolution:

A: OK. Let’s wait then. If they drop bombs we’re finished.

B: If they pass over our luck has changed.

A: Hold me.

B: Here it comes.

Throughout, the story is disorienting and indeterminate with respect to place and time and precisely ‘void’ in as much as it does not ‘go’ anywhere. ‘We don’t want any drama’, one of the protagonists says repeatedly, and ‘drama’ as a coherent whole is indeed absent, even though the narrative produces one ‘dramatic’ crisis after another. Echoing my analysis of *Goat Island’s* performance, reviewer Mary Paterson writes: ‘Instead of a whole there is a hole, a void, at the heart of this story (Paterson, 2009). Here, too, I would argue, the void marks the traumatic real – but it is different in kind.



Figure 3. Cathy Naden and Richard Lowdon in Forced Entertainment's *Void Story*

At first glance, *Void Story* may also stretch my reading in terms of 'traumatic *memory*', since the traumatic tale is told and imaginatively concretised by the audience in the present. But I am going to suggest that it can be read in terms of a post-traumatic *recall* of media-induced memories, a mix of reported news events and film fictions. Forced Entertainment have always been interested in accounting for life in a media-saturated society. Remarking on war correspondent Michael Herr's statement about his experience in Vietnam that 'you are as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did', Tim Etchells comments:

We always loved the idea in this – of one's responsibility for events only seen. The strange responsibility of the city and its endless crowds and half-glimpsed lives, or of the media space with its images everywhere, always, already. That (lucky) experience of having seen only two real dead bodies and yet thousands upon thousands of TV corpses – real deaths and fictional deaths, mediated deaths. We wanted to speak of what it felt like to live in this space – of second-, third- and fourth-hand experience. (Etchells, 1999: 20-21)

These mediated and vicarious experiences also affect memory, which results in hybridised mental constructs. As Victor Burgin puts it:

In the memory of the teletopologically fashioned subject, actual events mingle indiscriminately not only with fantasies but with memories of events in photographs, films and television broadcasts. (Burgin, 1996: 226)

Since the time of Burgin's and Etchells' writing in the 1990s, the enmeshment of our lives with mediated experiences has, if anything, intensified and involves a wider array of media. Consequently, the images and fragments of dialogue in *Void Story* are montaged and collaged from disaster and horror movies, TV news coverage, situations described or pictured on the internet and those encountered on video and computer games. In fact, one way of understanding the imbrication of actual and mediated experience, as well as the stressful but aimless escape narrative in *Void Story* is by reading it with Etchell's recent novel *The Broken World* (2008), which the performance prompted me to read. Here the obsessed narrator sets out to write a 'walk-through' of an all consuming computer game by the same name, while his real life falls apart around him. You, as the avatar hero of the game, are working your way from one town/level to the next, fighting one mission after another, witnessing one atrocity after another. There is no aim to this game, other than your survival: 'I must have been in *The Broken World* about 600 times (or probably more) and tho many times I came back dead or badly injured I know it better now and sometimes come back alive' (Etchells 2008: 1).

Both *The Broken World* and *Void Story* are darkly humorous in their ridiculous accumulation of vicariously witnessed disasters and yet contain a traumatic kernel revolving around the shock or 'trauma' of technological mediatiation of events in the digital age itself. As Jean Baudrillard has claimed, albeit in a totalising way, this mediatiation can paradoxically result in a strange amnesia as events 'drift unpredictably towards their vanishing point – the peripheral void of the media' (Baudrillard, 1994: 19). It is not that we cannot 'witness' someone else's pain and

trauma on television and film and be affected and transformed by them, but the relentless and infinite build-up of traumatic images and stories in a global information society is potentially so overwhelming that it can empty the individual story of lasting significance [11]. This, I believe, is the strange void that *Void Story* negotiates and of which it makes us aware by decelerating perception and transposing synthesised electronic information into collaged images, manually manipulated sounds and the grain of the voice of the performer who lives to tell the tale of what it is like to be confronted with accumulating mediatised traumata.

Conclusion

Having started with the insight that there is no one way in which postdramatic theatre relates to trauma, we can now conclude that this is partly because there is no one form of trauma. In a first attempt to map the continuum of postdramatic and posttraumatic forms, we have moved from a performance that intimates the traumatic Real through structural trauma and movement traces of traumatic experience, to a performance that remembers a recent traumatic event by making us re-inhabit the traumatic situation and the loss it caused, to a performance that plays with vicariously experienced, mediatised traumata and which raises the question whether traumatisation may not also reside in the very form of global mediatisation itself.

What can also be provisionally concluded is that postdramatic productions tend to be self-consciously aware of the theatrical and performative forms they employ to explore trauma and resist the closure and teleology of dramatically enacted narratives. At the same time they are also implicitly critical of many mainstream ways of excessively representing traumatic events and histories in this digital information age. By slowing down and defamiliarising perception they seek to actively involve the audience and re-hone our response-ability for trauma and traumatic damage in the twenty-first century.

They take risks in as much as spectators have to become active co-creators bringing their own memories and creating their own referential connections. In this sense, to an

extent, they also inevitably rely on the heavily mediatised and even dramatised representations that they themselves tend to eschew.

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Endnotes

Parts of this article have previously been presented at the symposium *Beyond Drama: Postdramatic Theatre*, (Huddersfield, Feb 2006), the *After Dubrovka* panel discussion (Manchester, Oct 2007) and the symposium *Goat Island: Lastness, raiding the archive, and pedagogical practices in performance* (Lancaster, Mar 2008). I am grateful to Matthew Goulish and Lin Hixon, Mole Wetherell and Neil Mackenzie and Tim Etchells for conversations and for making scripts and images available to me. I would also like to thank Bryoni Trezise, Caroline Wake and Geraldine Harris for feedback on earlier drafts.

[1] To begin with, we could think of Tadeusz Kantor's extraordinary theatre with its concept of the 'room of memory' shaped by the traumatic experience of the Second World War. His work exhibits, as Lehmann notes, 'the temporal structure of memory, repetition and the confrontation with loss and death' (Lehmann, 2006: 71). Similarly, we could think of Heiner Müller's theatre and his treatment of the stage as a landscape of exploded memory, as well as of many of Samuel Beckett's plays (such as *Not I* and *That Time*), which revolve around unspeakable traumatic memories whose impact is communicated through new textual and dramaturgical forms of ellipsis, breakdown and repetition. Both of these major playwrights and directors whose work Jeanette Malkin discusses under the heading of *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (1999) on closer inspection can be seen to have questioned the very paradigm of 'dramatic theatre' in relation to the impossibility of narrating traumatic history. More recent examples include Sarah Kane who felt compelled to seek new textual and theatrical forms that explode dramatic form, for example, to address relationships between the trauma of domestic abuse and the (mediatised) experience of war trauma, as in her play *Blasted*.

Furthermore, theatre scholars and practitioners are also beginning to make connections between the theory of postdramatic theatre and the engagement with trauma in contemporary *devised* theatre. Thus, Phillip Zarrilli refers to his collaboration on

Speaking Stones, a performance dealing with the displacement and trauma of peoples within central Europe, as a process of 'creating and performing a "post-dramatic" psychophysical score' (Zarilli, 2008: 24). The postdramatic dramaturgy of a 'fragmentary, non-narrative, psychophysical performance' aimed to 'both evoke and provoke a synergy between realities in Europe and historical memories' (25). By contrast, Bryoni Trezise analyses Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Tragedia Endogonia* in terms not so much of traumatic memory as of 'the image machine of contemporary trauma culture' (2008).

[2] See for example, Kaplan (2005: 34-38) for a measured critique.

[3] I am thinking, for example, of Freddie Rokem's excellent *Performing History* (2000), which discusses both drama and (postdramatic) performance in relation to the possibilities of performing the history of the Shoah.

[4] Hans-Thies Lehmann traces this 'exclusion of the real' as a principle of drama in Hegel's philosophy of drama (Lehmann, 2006: 42-44). Even though I will approach this phenomenon slightly differently through Lacan's particular concept of the Real (spelled with a capital R, following Lacan), its exclusion in the symbolic structure of drama still applies. As Lehmann argues (44-45), the performance dimension of drama in its sensuous material reality does, however, always carry the potential of drama's disintegration and dissolution from within. This is a potential that can fully blossom in postdramatic theatre.

[5] Aristotle stipulates that,

no organism could be beautiful if it is excessively small (since observation becomes confused as it comes close to having no perceptible duration in time) or excessively large (since the observation is then not simultaneous, and the observers find that the sense of unity and wholeness is lost from their observation, e.g. if there were an animal a thousand miles long). So just as in the

case of physical objects and living organisms, they should possess a certain magnitude, and this should be such that it can readily be taken in at one view [eusynopton], so in the case of plots: they should have a certain length, and this should be such that it can readily be held in memory. (Aristotle 1996: 14)

[6] As Lehmann argues in the context of facile comparisons between performance and terrorism:

Even if one could concede some illuminating structural similarities between terrorism and performance, one difference remains decisive: the latter does not happen as *means* to another (political) end; as a performance it is . . . not simply a performative act. By contrast, what is at issue in the terrorist action is a political or other *determination of aims* . . . The terrorist act is intentional, is performative through and through, an act and a postulate in the realm of logic of means and ends. (Lehmann, 2006: 180).

[7] Criticising especially the casual mention of Auschwitz in literature as amoral, Handke argues that 'formal questions are actually ethical questions':

When someone dares to write about hot issues in an unreflected form, these hot issues go cold and appear harmless. To mention the infamous place A. in passing may be acceptable. But to weave it into any old story without hesitation, in an inadequate style, with unsuitable means, with an unthinking language, that is unethical. The response then leads to the well-known sentence that one should finally stop . . . of Auschwitz . . . and so on. (Handke, 1972: 34, my translation)

[8] The identification of Chechen terrorists with Al Qaeda style international terrorism and the depiction of the event as a Russian 9/11 by the Putin government has further contributed to a deliberate obfuscation of the situation (see Dunlop, 2006: 136).

Triggering memories of 9/11 and the London bombings, the mention of 'terrorists' in a

performance in Britain could well contribute to a 'mis-remembrance' of the Moscow Theatre Siege, too.

[9] Critics of the Putin regime publicly voiced suspicions that the Russian government had had prior knowledge of the Chechen hostage-taking and had even infiltrated the Chechen extremists with their own *agent provocateurs* in order to weaken the influence of moderate Chechen separatists. Several of these critics – including Sergei Yushenkov, journalist Anna Politkovskaya and Aleksandr Litvinenko – have since been assassinated. A comprehensive and balanced study of the events by John B. Dunlop arrives at the provisional conclusion that 'the bulk of evidence . . . points to significant collusion having occurred on the part of the Chechen extremists and elements of Russian leadership in the carrying out of the Dubrovka events' (Dunlop, 2006: 155). Dunlop also cites evidence that the terrorists carried mostly fake explosives (148), although it is unclear whether the Russian special forces were aware of this.

[10] For a sophisticated analysis of *Exquisite Pain* in relation to trauma theory see Anneleen Masschelein (2007).

[11] Both Geraldine Harris and Christine Stoddard in the previous issue make the point that the live performance situation and co-presence of spectator and performer has recently been uncritically privileged as essential for witnessing. I do not disagree with them but wonder whether theatre, as an antiquated 'medium', might paradoxically have a special role witnessing and reflecting on the effects of mass mediatisation.

List of Illustrations

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Figure 2 *After Dubrovka* at the Manchester Dance House. With kind permission by Neil Mackenzie and Mole Wetherell.

Figure 3 Cathy Naden and Richard Lowden in Forced Entertainment's *Void Story*. With kind permission by Forced Entertainment and the photographer Hugo Glendinning.

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