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UNSPEAKABLE TERRAIN: VISUALISING ONTOLOGICAL TERROR IN PERFORMANCE

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**Is there any place more naked, exposed- or stripped bare
than a human being in a state of terror?**

Dusk in the Silent Forest: Our Collective Understanding of Terror

"...we are a stunned human-kind...no longer aware of its own limits"

Romeo Castellucci
2006¹

This paper presented at the 2010 ADSA Conference held at the Australian National University draws upon my practice based research submitted for a Master of Animateuring (Cross Modal Performance) at the faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts- Melbourne University. *Aviary* which premiered at the Living Museum of the West in 2006 (a visual space-specific performance during which only one word was uttered) was used as an exemplar of my practice revealing how ontological terror can only be artistically represented through carefully chosen veils, two of which can be made explicit through an analysis of the aesthetic conventions of the liminal uncanny and the traumatic sublime.

This specific 'terror' highlighted as the focus of my research is intrinsically linked to philosophical inquiries into the nature of Being and more specifically 'not-

¹ Castellucci, Romeo., Master Class at Malthouse Theatre Melbourne, Sunday 15th October 2006.

Being', non-existence, oblivion. The 'terror of oblivion', Heidegger's articulation of 'the Nothing' and its alignment with Bakhtin's concept of 'cosmic terror' (the human terror of total and utter annihilation due to a natural disaster of cosmic proportions i.e. an asteroid colliding with the planet²) and its associated landscape of representations was the genesis of my research.

Traumatic experiences (which Lacan would define as 'the Real'³), momentarily rip open our constructed veils of permanence allowing us to glimpse the certainty of death and 'the Nothing' and create a sense of 'not-Being at home in the world'⁴.

I believe this 'terror' is the fault line of western culture.

This causes an immense problem for artists, as ontological terror is unrepresentable in any artistic medium. To do so is to destroy it. Once given form, terror metamorphoses into something else entirely. When we attempt to grasp it, even the most meticulous realisation is decoded by an audience in relationship to shock, horror, disgust, pornographic violence, anguish, sickness, madness, hysteria and a million other things but never terror.

Terror has no face. This is its power.

We cannot see a void. We can only sense it.

In representing terror we only have veils. That we need these veils is signified by the fact that the horror of removing them is embedded in the etymological origin of the word *apocalypse*.⁵

Ontological terror is concerned with terror at the heart of human existence (or the end of the world as we know it) and it is the bedfellow of grief. In a state of grief

² Bakhtin, M., *Rabelais and his World*, Trans. H. Iswolsky, Cambridge Mass, MIT Press, 1968.

³ This concept is discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

⁴ Watts, M., *Heidegger: A Beginners Guide*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2001, p44.

⁵ From the Greek *APOKALYPIS* literally meaning 'the lifting of the veil'.

www.wikipedia.org/apocalypse

(or a miniature, domestic apocalypse as I like to call it) our protective veils are temporarily torn away and we become acutely aware of its colossal presence.

'Any true feeling cannot in reality be expressed. To do so is to betray it. To express it however is to conceal it...Any strong feeling produces an idea of emptiness within us, and lucid language which prevents this emptiness also prevents poetry appearing in thought. For this reason, an image, an allegory, a form disguising what it means to reveal, has more meaning to the mind than the enlightenment brought about by words or their analysis...Hence true beauty never strikes us directly and the setting sun is beautiful because of everything else we lose by it'

Antonin Artaud⁶

Artaud is talking to us in opposites and in doing so he draws our attention to the spaces and harrowing silence that lie between them. He highlights the ambiguous territory of the threshold. To disguise what we mean to reveal is still the staple diet of human functioning and as such, performance. We have invented elaborate systems of perception and interaction which aim for a target yet avoid a direct strike in any form.

When it comes to an experience so fundamental to our humanity such as 'ontological terror'⁷, we are, I believe, stuck in Plato's Cave. Which begs the question, why is the dance of shadows reflected on the cave wall more palatable than the outside world?

The obvious answer would be that we are terrorized by our own mortality, frightened into submission by the horrors of the outside world and the possibility of our own death or the death of those we love. This is partially accurate. The calming flicker of sex, violence and death, the staple of almost every household television and computer screen from approximately 6pm each evening, enslaves most, yet what is outside that could possibly be so blinding and incomprehensible that we would prefer to tighten our own shackles, content

⁶ Artaud, A., 'The Theatre and its Double' in London. Calder and Boyars, 1974, p53.

Collected Works- Volume 4, Trans: Victor Corti,

to consume the shadows cast in the communal fire by the puppeteers? What is it about our human condition that we prefer to remain prisoner to a reflected reality and live in darkness, unwilling to leave the confinement of the cave? And if due to a longing for regeneration, we do slip out, why do we hunger to return?

When I venture out of my cave, particularly at SVU hour, I am privileged⁸ to be greeted by a strange, unsettling stillness and, dare I say it, sublime beauty. There are no bombs exploding, no collapsing buildings, no giant teething vaginas, no sex fiend murders stalking me, no real threat. Still, I feel a strange and deep discomfort of the kind experienced most acutely walking alone through the silent forest at dusk. I put this forward as a metaphor for our collective terror, a silent forest may be a city laneway, a deserted park, a desert landscape or a cliff overlooking the ocean. It is a liminal place, at the threshold of night and day, at once sublime and a gateway to all things subliminal, a fissure where terror lies.

Confronted by the awe inspiring, silent forest, I become aware of the 'real' shadows being cast, I am aware that the ground on which I stand is fracturing; I sense the danger because the void is closer than I dare to admit. I miss the lulling comfort of the cave, with its flickering, fictional shadows and upon return, dutifully re-clasp my chain, content to consume the contrived monsters.

Can we approach terror by creating performance which guides the audience into the silent forest at dusk? Like Poe's raven, terror lurks on the threshold of our awe and a stunning sunset is shadowed by a glimpse at our mortality, an ontological paradox, which highlights the human grief of sensing what, could be, in a moment, lost forever.

⁸ I am aware of the presumptive nature of this statement and make it with the knowledge that I am a white, educated, middle class woman, living in relative economic and social stability in Australia in 2007. In no way are such statements representative of a wider human experience or condition.

Speaking of the Unspeakable

How does one speak of the unspeakable? Furthermore, what exactly is 'the unspeakable'? The unspeakable is related to the Lacanian conception of 'the Real' or that which resists symbolisation and language.⁹ The Real is located at the threshold of our imagination and is concerned with trauma, the void, terror, collapse and emptiness which can only be represented through projections or reflections of what we sense but cannot gaze upon directly. Could it be then that artistic representations of the Real are most effective when pre-tragic? They do not attempt to reproduce it or ask the audience to gaze directly at it via realism, character or conventional narrative but work elliptically and abstractly around it using conventions such as the chorus, symbols, signs and visual spectacle.

Romeo Castellucci: Theatre's radical re-signification, 'INFANS' and the 'glance worthy of being tragic'

"Tragedy is a poison a community consciously takes in...it belongs to the human race".

Romeo Castellucci 2006¹⁰

For Romeo Castellucci - tragedy is the form we return to over and over in an attempt to understand inexplicable things such as violence, death or the loss of hope. For Castellucci, the gaze of the spectator needs to become that of an emotional witness, closer to that of a child. Like Artaud, Castellucci returns to the pre-tragic to gain inspiration for his radical re-signification. He uses the term 'INFANS', or "before speech" to describe how children process the world through an enlarged space of visual and aural attention before they gain the ability to integrate these experiences into the symbolic structure of language. To

⁹ Kirshner, L.A., 'Trauma, the good object and the symbolic: A Theoretical Integration' in *Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing, 1994, pp235-242

¹⁰ Castellucci, R., *ibid.*

reiterate Lacan, some experiences or 'the Real', can never be integrated in this way. .

Through liminal theatrical representation, Castellucci's uncanny dream-like compositions, sublime as they are horrific, I believe, access 'something else' in regards to emotional involvement due to the power of collective grief. Castellucci's mastery of image, created through body, action, object, time, space, sound, light conceived and delivered in 'one breath' partially explain the peculiar power of his theatrical projects yet he also manages, in my opinion, to access and give form to a Jungian 'collective unconscious' if you like. His theatrical works and video 'memories' are profoundly and intimately affecting but the reasons why this might be so are highly elusive. He is unique in that he manages to represent through theatrical imagery something that is somehow foreign yet deeply understood collectively. This 'something else' or 'space between' that is presented on Castellucci's stage is not easily rationalised as he is dealing with the territory of the unspeakable, the inarticulate and the unrepresentable

I believe it is precisely because of his understanding of *INFANS* and his treatment of form in the creation of visual performance texts that I believe he gets closer than most to an actual representation of the 'Real'.

***Aviary* and the unspeakable moment**

Aviary was entirely constructed around a traumatic encounter or 'a moment of ontological terror'- **the death of a child**

Action based Improvisations focusing on the 'core moment' of terror with the two main actors were repeatedly video recorded to institute patterns of text usage, movement and gesture.

Refer to Image Clip A

Workshopped on the floor with the two principle actors- this panic-stricken, theatrical manifestation of terror began to cast shadows. We would create the entire final performance around the four identified emotional states, dynamic, rhythm, physicality of this moment. It would be reflected, re-written and abstractly storyboarded but it would never be spoken of. There would only be abstracted use of this text in the final performance dispersed through the soundscape, and no re-enactment of the horror in real time. Nevertheless, its presence was undeniable, casting its reflection into every image.

I will now focus explicitly on how the shattered refractions of ontological terror, revealed through an intensive focus on the scene of grief, were made manifest in a sequence of *Aviary* which corresponds to the rehearsal footage you have just witnessed.

'The moment of terror, like the instant of pain, is a moment of zero time and infinite duration. Although terror can only occur in history, it is felt as a naked singularity, existing outside all possible representation. In the actual time that terror and pain occur, history cancels itself, places itself under erasure and disappears'.

Anthony Kubiak¹¹

Kubiak's profound observation upon a temporality of terror seems to capture the lived experience of a traumatic event; the implosion of time and space, the known world collapsing in on itself, the conception of self splitting and disintegrating as its boundaries are breached. Grief is uncanny. The shock involved with sudden loss rips holes in veils, revealing the gaps between secure dichotomies; Past and Future, Self and Other, Body and Mind, Presence and Absence, Known and Unknown. The moment of '...zero time and infinite duration', to which victims of trauma compulsively return, is a cataclysmic collision revealing a zone of erasure, of nothingness. The visual narrative and temporal sequencing of *Aviary* was organised around this principle.

¹¹ Kubiak, A., *Stages of Terror*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991, p88.

The overall mise-en-scene which you will witness a scene from shortly- was organised by the spatial distinction between the outside, unhomely, choric space (upstairs) and the inside, homely, domestic space (downstairs) with the threshold between. Each installed area of the space is concerned with the imprint of trauma. The spaces are organised to correspond symbolically to each figure and their associated traces of memory. The figures you will witness are exemplars of the aesthetic conventions of the traumatic sublime which employs the convention of intersubjective figures which serve as sites of remembrance. These phantom bodies are borne from the shattering of self into other in a moment of terror. These bodies are the birds of the soul, trapped within the aviary of the mind and body. The multiplication of the female protagonist into the woman in the kitchen, the 'doll like' innocent and the drowned corpse function as representatives of the past, present and future. Her choric fragments, the nightmarish bird women, through their movement across borders of time and space act as extensions of the protagonists traumatic memory.

Image Clip B- 9 mins

As we view I will briefly summarise my definition of the aesthetic conventions of the traumatic sublime and the liminal uncanny

The Traumatic Sublime

Three categories of the sublime have been identified by Kimberly Segall who first coined the term 'traumatic sublime' in 2005.¹² It is this conception of the sublime that is most useful to my interrogation of the treatment of terror through the formal aesthetics of *Aviary*.

Segall identifies psychological experiences of elevation of self through the classical sublime and temporary loss of self through the gothic sublime, and proceeds to argue that there is a third experience, a fracture of self which occurs in the 'traumatic sublime'. Her analysis is focused on a particular sublimity

¹² Segall, K., *Pursuing Ghosts: The Traumatic Sublime in J. M. Coetzee's "Disgrace"*, Seattle Pacific University, The Indiana University Press, 2005, pp40-54.
www.muse.jhu.edu/journals/research

found in post-colonial literature where a memory of trauma is displaced, fractured and repeated. She states 'the traumatic sublime is a troubling sensation that occurs when a painful event of the past is changed into a disturbing image and shifts the gaze from self to other'.¹³ This shifting of the gaze from 'self to other', from the actual to the symbolic, the void to the veil is vital to understanding how 'ontological terror' was explored in my production of *Aviary*.

The Liminal Uncanny

Amongst the ruins of traditional modes of representation, new representative strategies are needed to deal with this acutely unsettled terrain. When we look at the question of defining new modes of dealing artistically with terror and tragedy, a distinct repetition of ideas can be noted. Speechlessness, incomprehensibility, silence, the Other, the unknown, the unimaginable, the spectacle, the eruption of the Real, the void, the ruin, the things that exist between, the threshold.

Drawing on the notion of 'the unsettling' in relationship to the contemporary sublime I have identified the 'liminal uncanny' as a specific mode of signification in performance which essentially manipulates liminal qualities and blends them with the persistent themes of the Freudian Uncanny. The liminal mechanisms which are most pertinent to this performance aesthetic include:

- Repetition
- Non-linguistic coding and a focus on pictorial/visual representation
- Density of imagery which is taken to spectacle proportions
- Working upon the senses and emotions
- Focus on *gestus* (action of body) and *personae*
- Contradictory *mise-en-scene* which seeks a problematised thematic
- Use of unconventional space

¹³ Segall, K., *ibid*, p42.

*'In the interval between each thought,
In the interval between each heartbeat,
In the place where there is no breath,
We recall what we always knew.'*¹⁴

In conclusion, I believe that *Aviary* was successful in demonstrating the potency of these mechanisms as contemporary performance aesthetics that can function as a means to reflect deeply personal terror and trauma.

Overall, while the production was successful in relationship to my objectives, the intense focus on the scene of grief and the resulting ambiguous complexity of the mise-en-scene could be criticised for being too inwardly focused, self-contained and at times overly obscure. While I feel this intricacy was a major strength of the production, some audience members expressed a desire to understand, with greater clarity, the origin and meaning behind the complex imagery. While ambiguity and indeterminacy are core mechanisms of a liminal aesthetic, there is a balance to be found between allowing silence and space for audiences to feel inspired in the creation of their own meaning yet reveal enough so as not to leave the 'uninitiated' floundering in confusion. Finding this balance as artists and the issue of 'reader competency' in audiences remains one of the major challenges for performance, which utilises these aesthetic mechanisms.

In addition, *Aviary* was intensely focused on personal terror and trauma manifesting in a domestic situation (albeit with its inherent politics) and while the choric elements provided glimpses into wider social, cultural or historical terrors, the production was limited in demonstrating how the liminal uncanny or the traumatic sublime may deal with the phenomena of 'terror' beyond a domestic or personal focus. My most recent work developed with performance company RED CABBAGE- *Collapse*- involved the creation of a large scale installation at the partially ruined Maritime association precinct in Williamstown- November 2008- in this work, the audience journeyed to the site by boat to witness a post-apocalyptic community in a state of recurring collapse-

¹⁴ Thompson, W.I., *The Time Falling Bodies Take to Light- Mythology, Sexuality and the Origins of Culture*, New York, St Martins Press, 1981, p7.

time does not allow me to go into the details of this project here but nevertheless this project and the recent Tragedy Cycle developed by Romeo Castellucci demonstrate to me that the employment of liminal aesthetics can give testimony to traumatic history, cultural terrors and collective grief and these works give me confidence in the potential power of such performance mechanisms to speak to us of the unspeakable in its wider social and political context.

My research methodology draws upon a qualitative, phenomenological model with the artist/researcher acting as a *Bricoleur*.¹⁵ The psycho-analytical models of both Freud and Lacan have been used to analyse my performance practice. In addition, the theoretical, methodological and artistic practice of Antonin Artaud, and Romeo Castellucci, have been investigated in order to articulate a position for my artistic practice within a theoretical model.

¹⁵ Denzin, N., 'Romancing the Text: The Qualitative Researcher-Writer-as-Bricoleur' *Bulletin of the Council of Research in Music Education*, No. 122, Fall, 1994, pp.15-30.

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